

Can Never Wrong this Right

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Can Never Wrong this Right

by [theopteryx](#)

Summary

Written for the hc_bingo challenge, for the square of 'forced soul-bonding.'

It's 1949 and Dr. Way is a professor of Archeology and Frank is his constantly exasperated (and secretly pining) assistant. When their latest trek takes them to South America to locate the fabled Blood Stone, however, they both find more than they bargained for.

Frank hated August. It was sweltering in New Jersey and his glasses always slipped down his nose, no matter how many times he pushed them back up. The suits he had to wear to work were too big - everything was too big, ever since the flu he'd caught early last year - and it all stuck to his skin in uncomfortable places.

He stopped in the University's bathroom on the way down the hallway to splash some tepid water on his face and neck. He was glad classes were still in session so no one could see him pull his hat and suit jacket off and pat at the stains around the armpits of his dress shirt. He grimaced when he saw himself in the mirror, all flushed and wrinkled. He looked like a teenager, and not the assistant that he was to one of the most well-respected Archaeology professors at one of the most well-respected universities on the East Coast. He sighed again. He *hated* August.

The bell rang out loud and clear and Frank jerked his head up, his glasses slipping down his nose again. *Damn*. He hastily threw on his suit jacket as students started spilling into the hallway and pushing their way into the bathroom. Making his way down the hallway took forever, since most of the kids thought he was a student and never moved out of his way, (he practically had to *shove* his way past the two young men talking about President Truman's latest something-or-other) but eventually he got through the hallway and down to Dr. Way's office.

There were already a few students milling around Dr. Way's front door but Frank skipped ahead of them, not even looking back as one of them called out, "Hey, buddy, get in line!"

He closed and locked the door behind him, effectively shutting out the noise of the hallway. The lights were on in the office but he couldn't see Dr. Way anywhere.

"Dr. Way?" he called out, moving away from the door slowly. "Are you here?"

He crossed around to the back of the desk in the far corner, the top of it completely covered in junk and piles of old textbooks and what looked like

about six pairs of old revolvers. Frank sighed. He'd just cleaned this place last week. He picked up the ashtray off of the floor before Dr. Way could accidentally kick it over *again*. This place already smelled like a tobacco factory.

He crouched behind the desk and looked underneath it, and, sure enough, Dr. Way was there, curled up in the little space and snoring, a textbook over his face.

Frank plucked the textbook away and shut it with a loud snap.

Dr. Way jerked up so hard he smacked his head into the underside of the desk and immediately crumpled back down. "Ow."

"Good afternoon, Dr. Way," Frank said, standing up again. "Did you make it to class today?"

Dr. Way just blinked up at him. "I was reading that. Did you lose my place?"

"Of course not. Did you make it to class today?"

Dr. Way stared at him. "What's today?"

Frank sighed. "Wednesday."

"Oh. I suppose I didn't," he said, obviously not too worried about it.

Frank reached down and extended a hand to help pull Dr. Way up and back on his feet. Dr. Way grunted and leaned back against the desk, immediately striking up another cigarette. He ashed into an old coffee cup before Frank could move to get him the ashtray, which Dr. Way *knew* drove Frank crazy. He had his vest open and shirtsleeves rucked up all around his elbows and his hair was all over the place, and he didn't look sweaty at all. He had a funny little look on his face, half-grinning around his cigarette. Frank ignored the way his stomach dropped like it always did when Dr. Way looked at him like that. Or ever.

Dr. Way let out a lopsided grin as he exhaled a long plume of smoke. "I was up late."

"I can see that. Did you shower? You have a meeting with the Dean in a few hours, and some of your students are outside, probably to ask you about the project on the Neolithic-"

Dr. Way waved his hand in the air, effectively shutting him up. "Doesn't matter. Doesn't *matter*, you know why I was up late? Do you?" He was grinning wide, practically giddy. Frank knew what that meant. He braced himself.

"Research?"

"Research!" Dr. Way crowed, almost jabbing Frank in the face with his finger and Frank's eye with his cigarette. "I got a letter from Dr. Toro down in South America. He's found it, Frank, he's *found* the way to the Blood Stone," he said, his voice getting low and quiet.

Frank gulped. "South America?" That sounded *really* hot.

"We leave tomorrow. Dr. Toro's booked us a flight on his friend's private charter. Just think, Frank, just think - after years of looking for it, we're going, we're *going* and it's going to be *beautiful*," Dr. Way said, not even looking at Frank anymore. He was staring out the window, seeing it in his mind, his eyes wide, like he was looking upon something sacred.

Frank just blinked at him. He didn't even think about protesting. "Do you need help packing?"

*

Apparently the private charter was a *very* private charter, as the only other passengers on their flight were several boxes of freight and all of Dr. Way's carrying bags for textbooks. Dr. Toro's friend had stripped out the air conditioning when he'd started running supplies during the war, to save weight, but apparently never got around to putting it back in. Frank pulled

at the limp front of his shirt to unstick it from his skin, practically suffocating in the muggy interior.

Dr. Way was passed out in the seat next to him, his thighs pressed close to Frank's. Frank was sweating where their legs touched but Frank didn't move away, just nervously ran another hand through his unruly hair to get it off his face. He never understood how Dr. Way could just pass out on these trips like this, like he was at home, like it was nothing. Frank never slept on these things.

When the plane was actually up in the air and seemed slightly less like it was going to explode at any moment, Frank let himself relax a little bit back against the seat. Dr. Way slept on next to him, one of his textbooks on his lap, his finger still in the crease where he was keeping his spot.

Frank gently eased the textbook away and opened it to the page Dr. Way had been reading. Before he'd passed out he'd been telling Frank about the research he'd done the night before - Frank had heard the story of the Blood Stone a million times since Dr. Way had come across a reference to it in one of his old texts over two years ago, but apparently there was something new.

He squinted at the page, trying to see what Dr. Way had been so excited about, but couldn't read the language properly yet. He heard a shifting next to him and when he looked over Dr. Way was awake, blearily looking down at the page of the book over Frank's shoulder.

Dr. Way pointed at a section about half-way down the page. When he spoke it was low, almost a mumble. "Here. See? The other passages talked about it being used out of revenge, and spite, but there's a reference here - down here, it's kind of hard to tell, but look," he said, shifting closer until he was practically talking in Frank's ear. "There was a woman who made it, who gave it its power, who gave it too much power because she loved the Stone so much."

"Too much power," Frank managed, keeping his eyes forward on the page. "That doesn't sound like something you do if you love something. And why would she love a rock?"

Dr. Way sighed and leaned back against the seat and Frank felt young, foolish, like he'd said something stupid. "Love's all about power, Frank, whether you mean it to be or not. It's not always a bad thing. The other passages, they made it seem like it was a bad thing - but this one - it's lonely. It's about longing, not fighting, not about gaining the power to fight."

He was quiet after that, his breathing even, and Frank assumed he'd fallen back asleep. Frank sighed and looked back down on the page. It just looked like words in a language he didn't understand. He turned and stared out the window at the land below them, the spread of the country tiny and green and pushing farther and farther away.

*

South America was so hot. At least Frank didn't have to wear a suit. He'd given up on dress shirts a few days in, which seemed to delight Dr. Way in some strange way, like he was taking gleeful pleasure the more uncomfortable Frank was in their surroundings. It wasn't like his mother was there to scold Frank about walking around in torn trousers and an undershirt, though. He didn't really tell her about these trips. It was probably better for her health.

It'd been a week and a half since they'd landed in South America, and three days since they'd gotten to Peru, and so far all they'd found were a bunch of bad directions, eight million bug bites, and some rather unfortunate sunburns. Dr. Way's spirits were high as ever, though, always pointing out something new to Frank along the path. He lived for this. Frank would have just killed for a shower.

Frank took another swing with the machete and hacked at a bunch of foliage that was blocking their path. "Dr. Way, look!" he called, pointing ahead. "I think I see one of the Little God statues you were telling me about, there, up ahead."

Dr. Way came up behind him and clapped a hand on his back. "Good eye, Frank! I think that means we're closer."

"Does it now," Frank said, unable to keep the grumpy tone from spilling out. He shoved the machete into the ground for a second while he fumbled with his glasses, wiping some of the filth off onto the hem of his undershirt.

"Frank-" Dr. Way said, and Frank thought he was going to chastise him, but Dr. Way didn't say anything else. Frank blinked around him, but Dr. Way was gone. He slid his glasses on again and spun around, immediately picking up his machete.

"Dr. Way!" he called, taking a step forward. "Dr. Way, where are you?"

He took another step forward but it was a step forward into nothing, and the next thing he knew he was tumbling down, down, down into darkness.

*

His head was *killing* him. When he finally managed to open his eyes everything was blurry and everything in his body ached, and there was a dark shadow above him.

Frank jerked back but there were hands on his face, stilling him. "Frank, hey, it's alright, it's me."

"Dr. Way?" Frank said, blinking up at him in the dark. "You're all fuzzy."

"Oh, right!" Dr. Way said, slipping Frank's glasses back onto his face. "Didn't want them to get crushed."

Frank sat up and groaned. "Where *are* we?"

Dr. Way frowned at him. "We're in Peru, Frank, how bad did you hit your-"

"No, where are we *right now* in the *dark*," Frank said, cutting him off.

"Oh! Right. Yes, well, it looks like we've literally stumbled upon what we were trying to find."

Frank's hands stilled on his head, feeling for knots. "Really?"

Dr. Way nodded and Frank could hear the excitement in his voice, how he was practically giddy. "We were looking for the entrance but one of the tops of the underground passages collapsed when we walked across it. So we're *inside*, Frank, how amazing is *that*-"

Frank grimaced. "How do we get out?"

Dr. Way got to his feet and held a hand out for Frank's. "The only way out is through. I think. Or perhaps left. Let's find out, shall we?"

Frank sighed and let Dr. Way pull him to his feet. His ankle was a little sore but besides that he was just a little banged up. He grabbed his pack and reshouldered it and followed Dr. Way down the hall, skipping a little to catch up. Dr. Way might have been excited about it, but Frank knew that this place didn't want them there just as much as Frank didn't particularly want to be there. These things never went well.

*

About four hours later (Frank figured it was four, his watch was completely busted from the fall, but it *felt* like four) they were still making their way through tunnels. So far there had been no traps, no death around the corner, nothing trying to crumble in upon them and swallow them into the earth. He hated to admit it, but he was getting pretty bored. Dr. Way was humming under his breath, some song Frank hadn't heard since the war. Something in his brain clicked and he almost stumbled.

"Sir?" Frank asked, starting after him again.

"Yes?" Dr. Way said, not looking back. He was staring at some symbols carved into one of the walls, and had his hands outstretched towards them, like if he touched them they'd tell him what they said.

"Were you in the war?" Frank asked. Dr. Way talked about the things he loved a lot, things that interested him, but he never talked about what he did before he'd started at the University. Frank was almost pathetically desperate to know more about him.

Dr. Way was silent for a minute. "Yes." He didn't say anything else and didn't turn around, and when he started walking away he didn't hum any more.

Frank opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out. He shouldn't have said anything. He should have learned to just hush up by now. He had to stop for a second, just let the little sick feeling in his stomach work its way through.

He followed Dr. Way into the next room but paused by the entrance to the room and looked at the symbols by the door. They weren't in any language he knew, but it *felt* like he knew them, like if he just squinted at them hard enough they'd make sense. He touched them gently and tried to imagine who had carved them before - they looked angry, forced into the rock with some kind of tool, but Frank knew they weren't angry. Desperate, maybe. He rubbed a thumb over one of the cracked figures and followed Dr. Way through the arch.

When he came around the next corner he almost ran right into the back of Dr. Way, who was stopped in his tracks.

"Doctor -" Frank started, but Dr. Way cut him off with a quick gesture. He quietly peered around Dr. Way's shoulder to see what he was looking at, and immediately felt cold all over.

They'd found it. The Blood Stone. It was up on a rock in the back that almost looked like an altar, the back wall completely overgrown with vines, except the top of the rock, where the plants almost seemed to stay away in a perfectly concentric circle. The Stone was tiny, so tiny, and mostly just looked like a dirty, carved piece of red rock in the middle of the altar, like someone had put it down there one day and forgotten about it.

Dr. Way took a step forwards but Frank shot out a hand to grab his pack and held him in place. Dr. Way stared at him like he was crazy but Frank ignored him. He knew he had to do this.

"Let me get this," he said. "I'll get it." His voice sounded weird to his ears but he didn't care. He couldn't take his eyes off it. He didn't trust it, didn't

trust *any* of it, but he knew it would fit perfectly into the palm of his hand, that it *wanted* him to get it.

"Are you sure?" Dr. Way asked, looking at him skeptically. "I can-"

"You stay here," Frank said, moving from around him. "I'll get it."

He moved around Dr. Way and strode out across the room, not even taking in his other surroundings, even though some little part of his brain reminded him that that was important, that he should watch. It was like the Stone had a thread running from it right into his eyes and he just had to follow as it pulled him in.

He hopped up the few steps to the altar and paused, just a moment, before plucking the stone from the top of the altar. They *did* fit perfectly together, the Stone and him, like it always should be cradled in the palm of his hand. Frank wanted to press it to his chest and never move again.

"Frank?" Dr. Way asked, sounding worried, and the second his voice rang out around the cavern Frank felt something shift, the air almost jerking around them, like someone had flipped a switch, and something was warming up. It smelled like ash burning, but mechanical and thick.

"Frank, come on," Dr. Way said, taking the few steps towards him, but Frank instinctively jerked back.

"I have to stay here," he said, voice flat.

"*What*," Dr. Way said. "Are you crazy? Something's not right. We have to get out of here, come on-"

Frank just shook his head. Dr. Way didn't understand. It didn't matter. He had to stay. There was nothing for him out there, no one who cared. But the Stone cared, and the Stone wanted him to stay there. She *loved* him, and he loved her, and why would he ever leave? How *could* he ever leave, now that he knew how that felt?

"Frank," Dr. Way started again, focusing intently on him, the way he cradled the Stone to his chest. Dr. Way had his hands out towards like he was trying to calm a startled animal, which was absurd. *He* was the one who was being irrational. "You need to put the Stone down."

Frank just shook his head. *No*.

"*Frank*," Dr. Way said again. He hesitated a second, like he couldn't believe what he was about to say. "Don't listen to her, okay? Listen to me. She wants you to stay here but if you stay here you will die."

"So?" Frank said. "At least we'll die together."

He dully noticed that Dr. Way's hands were shaking, but he didn't care. When he looked down he saw that the vines from around the altar had wrapped around his ankles, holding him fast.

"See? She wants me to stay," he said, face breaking into a smile. He'd never felt so good in his entire life, like he was a part of something, something big, something that only wanted to keep him safe forever. He liked that. He wanted to be kept safe forever too.

"Yes. Well, unfortunately, we have some prior engagements so I'm afraid she's going to have to excuse us, it would really be quite rude if we were late, you see," Dr. Way said, voice steady but high, inching towards Frank again. Frank took another step back and the vines tightened, almost cutting into his skin.

Things were rumbling around them, the air practically vibrating. Maybe the ceiling would collapse in on them. Frank couldn't wait to feel the weight against his chest, completely surrounding him, pressing him into the earth.

The walls were leaking, too, dripping wet and slick. Water pooled in the cracks of the floor before pressing up, building until the whole floor was covered, quickly soaking their shoes through to the soles.

Dr. Way looked over his shoulder, and then turned quickly back to Frank. "Frank?"

"Hm?" Frank asked. He had his eyes closed. He felt like humming.

"Forgive me for this later, will you?" Dr. Way said, and Frank was going to ask him what he was talking about but Dr. Way punched him in the face.

He hit the ground, hard, and the Blood Stone fell out of his grasp, skidding to a shallow part of the ground. "No!" he cried, trying to scramble for her, slipping on the wet floor, but Dr. Way had his arms around his waist in a second, yanking him back. He had Frank's machete and he was hacking at the vines around his ankles, even as Frank pushed against him to shove him frantically away.

"No, stop, let me go!" Frank cried, but Dr. Way had cut the vines back and was yanking him to his feet. Frank made one last scramble for the Stone and managed to shove Dr. Way hard enough that he fell back, water soaking him through, and Frank could get the Stone, they could be together again -

Dr. Way was back in an instant, wrenching the Stone out of his grip, both of their hands scrambling around it. Something pinged, then, like everything around them went silent and still for just a second, and they were the only things there, and then it was over, and Dr. Way had the Stone out of his hand and back on the altar.

"No!" Frank tried one last time, but it was too late, Dr. Way was pulling him out of the room and away, away from *her*, and it felt like Frank was physically being ripped away, and he tried to hold on but the walls were slick, sopping wet, and they were were falling down out of sorrow and he couldn't stop the tears he knew were spilling out of his eyes, the tears he knew she was shedding for him.

Dr. Way dragged him out of the room and down the crumbling hallway and Frank fought him every step of the way. He heard Dr. Way exclaim loudly, painfully, and then something slammed into Frank's head and his vision went totally black and he fell into it too, let it swallow him whole.

*

When Frank woke up again it was day, and they were outside. He blinked up at the sky. He felt *horrible*. A wave of nausea hit him and he immediately rolled to vomit up in the high grass.

"Frank?" a voice said, "Frank, hey, look at me-"

Frank hung his head and spit out bile into the grass. "*Please* tell me what just happened," he said, his voice warbling. He could taste the burning in his throat and nose and it made him dry heave again.

He managed to roll over on onto his back when he was done, expecting to see Dr. Way watching him from above, like last time, but he was sprawled on his back next to Frank. He looked like he'd been pretty sick too and he had his hand pressed to his stomach.

He blinked at Frank, a little dazed. "I think you got possessed by the Blood Stone."

Frank wanted to argue, but - he just sighed. "I think so too." If he thought back to it he could still feel it, still feel *her*, the place in his heart where she used to be but had been ripped out, like a ghost of someone he'd loved and lost. It *hurt*.

Dr. Way pressed back on his stomach. "Jesus, I ache. I ache all over."

"Me too," Frank said, and sighed, closing his eyes again. He missed Mikey. He wanted to call Mikey and tell him what had happened, have Mikey roll his eyes at him and tell him he had the answers in one of his books somewhere. "I miss Mikey," he sighed out loud.

Dr. Way sat up next to him like a shot. "What?"

Frank sat up too, dazed. "What?" he asked, turning to Dr. Way.

"How do you know Mikey?" Dr. Way asked, eyes wide.

Frank just stared at him. He didn't know a Mikey. He didn't know why he'd said that. "I - I don't. Who's Mikey?"

Dr. Way looked horrified. Frank had never seen him look like that before, never seen him look so *scared*. "He's my brother."

They stared at each other for a few seconds, but Frank could feel it, he could *feel* it, it was like how it had been down in the tunnels with the cave, holding the stone, like there was someone else inside his skin, filling up the empty space, overwhelming *everything*, twisting all up in his brain and nerves and heart, but instead of her it was *Dr. Way*.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Frank managed, barely leaning over into the grass before his stomach rolled and he heaved. He could distantly hear Dr. Way getting sick behind him, turned the other way, and he had an overwhelming sense of *this is not good*, of incredible dread, but he couldn't tell if it was coming from him or Dr. Way or the both of them. It was all tangled.

"So tangled," Dr. Way moaned, and Frank could only agree by covering his face with his hands.

*

If the plane ride down to South America had been terrible, the ride back up was *agony*. It was hard enough getting back to the landing pad with the both of them injured (apparently Dr. Way had suffered some bruised ribs pulling them out of the tunnels, which made it harder for Frank to breathe, and his face still ached from where Dr. Way had punched him and something in the tunnel had fallen and knocked him out). Whatever the Stone had done to him and Dr. Way, it had done it completely - everything they did and felt was echoed in the other, and then echoed in the other, until it was a neverending cycle of emotions and pain and nausea.

It was like someone had put a bell over Frank's head and slammed it as hard as they could to make it ring through his head and skull and whole body, but instead of a note it was *Dr. Way*. It was *terrifying*.

Frank had tried to keep his distance, had hoped that would work, but it seemed like it only made it worse, and he was too out of it to really think about it too much or consider the ramifications. Dr. Way spent the entire

flight back curled over into a little ball, his hands over his ears, eyes shut, and his forehead pressed to his knees, and Frank mirrored him, their thighs touching through their filthy pants. Touching Dr. Way, even in the most innocent of ways, was almost like putting a dampener on the bell and finally being able to hear the note. It wasn't much, but it probably kept him from getting sick on the flight back, and at this point Frank would take small miracles.

*

Frank couldn't wait to get home. The taxi cab driver had stared at them the whole way back, the way they pressed so close, but Frank didn't care. He just wanted to get *home*. And take a *shower*. And sleep for *days*.

They pulled up in front of the house and Frank felt so relieved it wasn't until they were out of the cab and walking up to the front lawn that Frank realized that they were in front of Dr. Way's home, not his apartment.

"Oh, hey, I think I should go -" Frank said, stopping in his tracks, but Dr. Way just shook his head, ignoring his protests, and unlocked the front door and passed inside.

Frank hesitated. Frank had been to Dr. Way's house briefly before, to work on University projects or to pick up textbooks Dr. Way had forgotten for class, but this felt intrusive. He wavered by the front door, considering turning around and grabbing a taxi back to his shitty little apartment, but his head ached at the thought. He *was* tired.

Dr. Way popped his head out the front door. He looked beat. "Frank, come on. We'll figure this out in the morning, okay?"

Frank just nodded and followed him inside, not entirely mollified.

Dr. Way's place had always been so messy that Frank usually ignored it completely when he was there, lest he give in to his obnoxious habit of straightening other people's messes. There were stacks of books

everywhere, shoved into corners and made into makeshift side tables, and ashtrays scattered around on every surface. There was dust everywhere, too, made worse from the fact that Dr. Way hadn't been home in a couple of weeks.

Frank sneezed. Dr. Way looked incredibly guilty.

"I'm sorry about the mess," he started, waving a hand towards it, "I don't really even notice it anymore."

"That's okay," Frank said awkwardly, his body already gearing up for another sneeze. He probably should have gone back to his apartment. But now that he was here, with Dr. Way, in Dr. Way's home, it was echoing all around him, the feeling of being actually *home*, and he didn't want to leave.

Dr. Way scratched at the back of his hair. "How about you go take a shower and I'll set up the sofa for you, okay?"

Frank just nodded. A shower would be great. He was pretty sure he still had blood caked on his face from the cave-in at the tunnels. That'd probably explain some of why the taxi cab driver had stared.

Frank still felt like he was having a horrible migraine but being in the shower helped. It wasn't like he could *hear* Dr. Way's thoughts, or anything too specific, but he was always *there*, and he could feel his emotions rolling around inside of him. Frank sighed and scrubbed at his face with the washcloth in the shower, letting the hot water and soap work at the dirt caked into his skin. The soap smelled like how Dr. Way always smelled, and Frank instinctively took a second to breathe it in, remembering that, but then it was like everything in his brain just stopped, dread falling over him like a cold sheet.

If he could feel Dr. Way, and Dr. Way could feel him, then he must know. He must *know*. Frank was going to be sick again. Oh god, oh god oh god Frank's completely overwhelming and horribly pathetic feelings about Dr. Way were something that Dr. Way was not supposed to know about, ever, as Frank had pretty much resigned to just be happy that Dr. Way wanted him

around at all and keep all of his untoward thoughts to himself. In private. Forever.

The feeling of dread didn't go away - was Dr. Way feeling it too? Did he feel what Frank felt? Or did he know and he was horrified? Frank fumbled for the shower and turned it off quickly, the pounding of the water on his back making him feel even more nauseated. Maybe he could block it out, maybe, maybe if he stayed away from Dr. Way it'd lessen, and he wouldn't *know*.

Maybe he could just stay in the bathroom forever. But then Dr. Way wouldn't be able to use the bathroom, and that would be rude. He shrugged into the extra pair of pajamas Dr. Way had pointed out in the linen closet, the sleeves too long, misshapen on his arms, and slowly inched out of the bathroom and into the hallway, absolutely terrified Dr. Way would be there to kick him out, and that would be that.

Dr. Way wasn't anywhere to be seen, though, and Frank was so tired, so *tired* he wasn't even sure if he could make it through the whole house to look for him. He barely made it to the sofa before collapsing down into the little nest of blankets Dr. Way had put out while he was in the shower. It felt almost like he had been drugged he was so tired - maybe Dr. Way was sleeping? Was this how this worked? Frank just wanted to groan, but he passed out on the pillow before he could even finish the noise.

*

When he woke up he was in Dr. Way's bed, pressed up against his back, *under the sheets* with his face practically up against the hairs on the back of Dr. Way's neck. He blinked rapidly and everything was fuzzy - where did he leave his glasses? - and he hoped that this was a nightmare. It *had* to be a nightmare.

Dr. Way twitched in his sleep, curling up a little on himself, his back still to Frank. Frank couldn't stay there. He had to get out *now*. He barely managed to push himself out of the bed before Dr. Way shifted again, turning over, and Frank could see the strip of pale skin on his stomach where his pajama shirt bunched up.

He fumbled out of the bed even though pulling away felt almost physically difficult, like pulling a spoon out of old molasses. He managed to make it back to the sofa and wrapped himself up in the blankets, exhausted again, trying to use them as a barrier between him and the ability to make any more untoward advances in his sleep.

He tried staying awake, keeping watch, watch over *himself*, but he felt himself getting dragged back down again, and he couldn't fight it. He was too tired.

*

When he woke up in the morning he was still on the sofa and he was so relieved he had to close his eyes for a second again in gratitude. He let out a shaky exhale. Good. Okay. Dr. Way would wake up eventually and they could pretend like this wasn't weird and that they could fix this. It would be okay.

Something nudged at Frank's back, though, and someone mumbled something behind him, and when Frank jerked to look he saw that it was Dr. Way, pressed between Frank and the back of the couch.

Frank's limbs flailed and he rolled off the sofa, hitting the floor with a smack. Dr. Way sat up straight and blinked out over the room, finally coming to rest on Frank.

"Why are you on the floor?" he asked, staring at him. His hair was all over the place, even more than Frank had ever seen it.

Frank opened and shut his mouth, unable to come up with anything to say. Dr. Way kept looking at him, then looked down at himself and then up around the room in a quick motion.

"Why am I on the *sofa*?" he asked incredulously.

Frank just gaped. "I - I think you - I think I - I, uh-"

"Are you always this eloquent in the morning?" Dr. Way asked, and Frank felt his face blush.

"Oh, I'm - " Dr. Way started, his ears turning pink, "I'm sorry, that - that came out wrong. This is a bit of a weird situation, isn't it."

Frank sighed and stared at the hardwood floor, not meeting his eyes. "Yeah. You could say that."

*

Once they got themselves sorted enough to leave the house (which in Frank's case meant avoiding Dr. Way as much as possible and trying as hard as he could to put him out of his mind. Which was in no way helped when Dr. Way insisted he wear some of his clean clothes, since his other ones were filthy, and now he smelled like Dr. Way *all over*, and it was the worst best thing that had ever happened to him) it was already around midday. And hot. Not South America hot, but still *really hot*.

Frank squinted in the sun and sighed as he pulled his glasses off to wipe them off on his - no, Dr. Way's - shirt sleeve. Dr. Way glanced over as they made their way to the car, looking incredibly nervous. He'd looked nervous ever since he'd woken up in Frank's sofa bed, and Frank could feel the edge of it working around his stomach. He just shut his eyes when they got inside the car and tried not to think or feel anything about *anything*, which was impossible because Dr. Way was right *there*.

"Mikey should be able to help us," Dr. Way said, breaking the silence. Frank cracked an eye but Dr. Way was still staring ahead, clenching the steering wheel.

The nervousness in Frank's belly smoothed out a little, and was replaced by something calm, and familiar - Frank had never had a brother, so he didn't really know what that was like, but he couldn't help but sink into it a little, let himself *feel* like he did.

Mikey apparently worked at the huge history museum downtown, which was strange because Frank and Dr. Way had been there hundreds of times

with artifacts and to do research but Frank was positive he'd never seen Dr. Way's brother, least of all heard of him.

When they walked up to the desk, though (different than the one they usually used), the secretary behind the reception area immediately smiled at them. "Gerard!" she exclaimed. "How are you? It's been a few weeks. You look tan. You actually get out of the University again? Find me any diamonds, like you've been promising?"

Dr. Way grinned back at her and leaned slightly against the desk. "One of these days, Ann, I promise. Scout's honor. We're actually here to see Mikey, though, is he in?"

Frank tried not to look at Ann. He felt awkward, and rude, but he was starting to bubble up with jealousy at her easy smiles and her *Gerard* and that would be bad, that would be *very* bad. He turned away to watch a small family by the exit, the child clutching a toy obviously just purchased at the gift shop, the delight on his face.

"He sure is! He's in the stacks. Just fill these out -" she said, passing them some forms, "-and I'll get you your badges."

Dr. Way scribbled their information down as she made the calls to get them through security. Frank just fidgeted with his hands in his pockets.

Finally, they were on the way. They had to pass several checkpoints and go farther into the back of the museum than Frank had ever been before. He couldn't help the little thrill that always came when you felt like you were getting a back stage view of things.

Dr. Way led them through what felt like acres of twisting hallways before stopping at a door labeled 'ARCHIVES.' He paused with his hand on the door and then turned back to Frank, looking like he was about to say something, but just shook his head slightly and passed on through.

Mikey was in the room, near the back, bent over a huge conference table completely stacked with books. It made Dr. Way's house look almost pristine. Frank just blinked at the mess. It ran in the family, apparently.

"Hey, Mikey!" Dr. Way said, calling out, and Mikey's head snapped up from the book he was thumbing through.

"Hey!" Mikey said, smiling warmly, and then started walking their way. He had a pretty bad limp and as soon as Frank noticed it he was hit by a wave of guilt so heady and overwhelming he felt his knees buckle, like he'd been kicked.

"Frank?" Dr. Way asked, immediately at his side, but Frank was already down on the ground, his forehead pressed to the carpet. It hurt so bad he was going to be sick with it, with this feeling, with the way that his insides were eating themselves alive. He dry heaved once, his mouth wet, but kept it all down.

"What's going on, what's the matter-" Mikey said, but Frank couldn't pull himself together enough to reply. Dr. Way was rubbing his back and that helped, a little, the contact, but Frank started to feel his eyes burn and he had to rip off his glasses to cover his eyes with his hands.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry -" he mumbled, unable to stop the words from falling out of his mouth, blurry and ragged, "I'm so sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry Mikey-"

"What is he talking about?" Mikey asked, confused. Dr. Way's hand was still and tense on Frank's back.

"I'm sorry Mikey, I'm sorry, I didn't-" Frank started again, barely even making sense. His head was throbbing and it was still all rolling around in his insides and it even hurt to breathe.

"Frank, stop," Dr. Way said. He sounded scared. Frank wanted to, he *wanted* to stop, but he was too far under it now.

"Mikey, where's the bathroom?"

"Over, over there, in the back hallway-"

"Stay here."

Dr. Way wrapped his arms around Frank's waist and quickly heaved him to his feet, half-carrying, half-dragging him to the bathroom around the corner. Dr. Way maneuvered him to sit on the counter, his feet dangling in the air, while he shut and locked the door and stood between his legs.

"*Frank*," Dr. Way said, moving his hands to grasp Frank's face. "Frank, look at me."

Frank was so miserable he couldn't look at anyone ever again, but Dr. Way gave him a little shake. "Concentrate for me, Frank. Look at me." He ran a thumb under Frank's eye to wipe away at something there, and Frank finally wrenched his gaze to look up at Dr. Way.

He was blurry, since Frank had left his glasses on the floor, but he looked about as bad as Frank felt, and it hit Frank like a wave again, but he closed his eyes for a second and kept his head above it.

"What did you do?" Frank managed, his eyes closing. He was so tired. Everything in his body *ached*. "How can you feel like that all the time and not - not -"

Dr. Way wet the small dish towel by the sink with cold water and started gently pressing it to Frank's face. "Shh, Frank, it's okay. Just breathe for me."

Frank concentrated on breathing, on focusing on himself enough to push the other stuff away. It was like trying to hold back water while it streamed through his fingers, but it helped enough that he could start to pull himself back together. Dr. Way just kept pressing the towel to his face. Frank probably looked awful.

Dr. Way was very quiet, each motion serious and heavy.

Frank waited silently.

Dr. Way didn't meet his eyes this time. "It's my fault he has the limp."

Frank knew his eyebrows raised, but he didn't say anything.

"We were - we were in the war, together. I thought it would be great to have my brother in my company, but it was hell - I was so scared for him all the time. I always looked out for him. We were in this little place in France one night, pretty far to the east, and some buddies and I found an abandoned house with a wine cellar. I drank too much and passed out. I was supposed to be on watch."

It took everything in his power not to reach out and touch Dr. Way, but Frank kept his hands in his lap.

Dr. Way sighed and rested the dish towel back on the counter. "We got hit. I would have seen them coming, if I'd been awake. If I hadn't been a drunk."

"So Mikey -"

"Still has a bullet in his thigh. They thought he was going to die. He got shipped home, and I had to stay and see out the rest."

Frank didn't know what to say, how to even *start*. Dr. Way just gave him a little rueful smile and looked away. "I'm sorry," Frank managed.

Dr. Way just nodded. "Me too."

Frank sniffed and pressed a hand to his face. He still felt nauseated, but mostly under control. "Mikey probably thinks I'm crazy."

Dr. Way smiled and patted Frank's leg. "He's related to me. He's pretty used to it by now. Come on. We'll go explain."

Frank nodded. "I'll be there in a second."

Dr. Way gave his leg another comforting pat and left him in the bathroom, still sitting on the counter. Frank took a second to press his hands to his face and just breathe a little. That was horrible. He didn't like that at all, he didn't like feeling so out of *control* of his own body. He was always in control. He always *had* to be in control, and this was taking that away. It was terrifying.

He hopped off the counter and looked at himself in the mirror. He was glad he didn't have his glasses on right then. He wasn't sure he wanted to see the

look on his face. It'd be okay. He just needed a second to get himself back together. He splashed some water on his cheeks and smoothed his hair back down and went out to meet Dr. Way and Mikey, bracing himself the best he could.

*

"*Soul-bonded*," Mikey repeated, staring at them. "You got yourself *soul-bonded*?"

Dr. Way sighed. "Looks like it."

"You would disappear to South America for two weeks only to get accidentally soul-bonded to your assistant," Mikey said, rolling his eyes. He darted a look over to Frank. "No offense."

"None taken," Frank said. He moved some of the big books on the conference table over to him, but he couldn't read the titles. They seemed familiar, though. "Are these going to help us?" he asked, peering at them.

"Hopefully, once I can figure out exactly what they're saying, but - I've read the Blood Stone archives, too, Gee. I thought it was something warriors were supposed to use to help them during war, to make them stronger."

"The story got convoluted along the way, I think. It's about power, but it's not *that* kind of power. It's about love," Dr. Way said. He pulled one of the books closer to him and started flipping through it until he found something he was looking for. "See this, here?" he said, pointing to a rough illustration on one of the old pages.

Frank and Mikey both leaned closer, craning to see. "Is that it?" Frank asked, frowning at it. It didn't look like the Blood Stone he'd seen in the tunnels. In the picture it looked bigger, and more jagged.

"I *thought* that was it, but I know what we found in the tunnel was the Blood Stone. This must have just been an artist's misinterpretation of it," Dr. Way said. "But-"

"I know that stone," Mikey said, staring at the page. He looked up at Frank and Dr. Way and his face was white. "I know that stone. We've cataloged it here before. I think it's on loan out in, Jesus, Boston or something."

Frank and Dr. Way just stared at him. "It must be something different, Mikes," Dr. Way said, incredulous. "We saw the Blood Stone in Peru, we both touched it -"

Mikey shook his head, immediately shutting him up. "I know this stone. I archived it myself. It came through here a couple of years ago. Look, here, in the illustration, you can see this etching around the outside, those little symbols. And there's even a chunk missing from the corner."

"Are you sure?" Dr. Way said, squinting down at the picture.

Mikey looked at it again. "I'm sure. Just - the one we had here didn't have this part -" he said, pointing to a strange bump on one of the sides. "I'm pretty sure that part was broken off."

"They were broken apart," Frank said, staring at the picture. He could feel the Blood Stone under his skin, could remember how it felt. How it *wanted* him. He knew. He knew her. He darted a look up at Dr. Way. "Didn't you say it was about love?"

"Well, yes-" Dr. Way started, a little flustered. Frank's stomach flopped but he ignored it.

Frank closed his eyes, remembering. "She loved him so much, and he was taken from her - taken from her in battle. She loved him more than anybody had ever loved anyone, and all she wanted to do was keep him safe-"

"Frank-" Dr. Way started, shocked, but Frank didn't stop, just let the words rise up.

"So she put it into the Stone. She knew she could protect him if she could just keep him with her, protect him with her love in a tangible, powerful way. But it was too late. She couldn't save him. Or herself. But she'd put so much of her soul into the Stone, and so much of *his*, that together they were

united in one, and they were happy. But the battle broke them apart, and then strangers took him away, and she just - she just misses him."

He opened his eyes and Dr. Way and Mikey were staring at him. He felt completely drained, like the bones had been sucked out of his body. "She's so lonely. They're apart, so she can't keep him safe."

"You think that's why the Stone latched onto you?" Mikey asked. "Because you're -"

"Lonely?" Frank asked. He winced when he said it. He didn't mean to sound so pathetic. Dr. Way looked at him with a strange expression on his face but Frank couldn't tell what he was feeling, and didn't want to know. He pushed it away.

Mikey shook his head. "Not exactly. Probably because you both were there. She seems like she was all about the soul-bonding."

"So you think if we find the other part of the Stone, *his* part, they'll be happy Stones together forever and she'll break the bonding over me and Frank?" Dr. Way asked, looking back down at the illustration and running his thumb around the edge.

Mikey nodded and scooted closer to the table. "I think so. I think she's just - like you said, lonely. If you reunite the two pieces she'll be complete. They'll be complete."

"What if it doesn't work?" Dr. Way asked, darting a side glance at Frank. "What if we reunite the Stones and Frank and I are still like - like this?"

Mikey looked up at them, and Frank didn't need to be soul-bonded to him to know how guilty he felt. "Then I don't know. Let's hope this works," he said, and pulled another book over.

*

Frank sat in the car while Dr. Way was inside sending a message off to Dr. Toro. It was raining, and muggy, and Frank just wanted to be the only

person in his own body again.

Mikey was off to Boston that very night with archive transfer documents signed by the museum for the other half of the supposed Blood Stone. The hope was that Dr. Toro would get Dr. Way's message, follow their directions to where they had found the Blood Stone, and - without actually touching it - bring it to them so they could reunite the two pieces. Which left Frank and Dr. Way nothing to do except wait.

Frank's fingers twitched. He'd *kill* for a cigarette about now. He'd given up smoking about four years ago, after he had a bad bout of pneumonia that made him feel like he couldn't breathe every time he took a drag. But - he could almost feel it as an *itch*. He knew Dr. Way kept cigarettes in his car, too, and a lighter -

He was lighting up before he could even really think about it, and the first drag felt so good, and so *awful* it was a little bit like his lungs were on fire. He kept smoking, though, and cracked the window enough to let some of the smoke out without getting the rain in.

Just then Dr. Way fumbled his way into the car, practically sopping wet from the thunderstorm. "Jesus, that came on fast," he said, shoving his wet hair off of his face.

"You send it off?" Frank asked, taking another drag.

"Yeah, yes, done and done. I gave him pretty thorough directions so if we're lucky he'll be on the way in a couple of days." Dr. Way paused with his hands on the cigarette case and looked over at Frank, eyes wide. "I didn't know you smoked."

"I don't," Frank said, a little sullenly. He passed the cigarette over to Dr. Way. "Here."

Dr. Way looked at him a little strangely but took it and inhaled, and Frank could *feel* it, feel the way things evened out a bit inside him, how it hit the spot like his own drag hadn't.

Dr. Way looked down at the cigarette and then back over at Frank. "I'm sorry."

Frank didn't say anything. There was really nothing to say, nothing he *wanted* to say.

*

They had to stop by the University for a bit, sort things out with the Dean and organize some of the school items they had left behind when they'd set out for South America. It was weird, standing next to Dr. Way while he discussed things with the other professors - he apparently *hated* talking to Dr. Richard, so much Frank started to feel a little nauseated, and Dean Wellington scared the shit out of Dr. Way. They asked him about his research trip, and he laughed and told them it had gone wonderfully. They didn't pick up on the strain on his voice, apparently, just clapped him on the back and kept on walking.

Frank couldn't help but feel even more uneasy as the day went on. He was apparently incredibly tuned in to Dr. Way's feelings, the strength of his emotions in certain situations, but Dr. Way had shown hardly anything regarding being bonded to Frank besides a few moments at the beginning in the jungle and some strange expressions on his face when Frank was emotionally reacting to various things. He couldn't help but turn it over in his mind - was it unbalanced because of how he felt for Dr. Way? Or was it just that Frank didn't really feel *anything*, was so boring and restrained that there was nothing to feel?

"Are you okay?" Dr. Way asked, shuffling through some of the papers on his desk. "You've been quiet."

Frank just looked off to the side, staring at all of the different maps and drawings and notes tacked up to the walls. The Dean was probably going to throw a fit whenever he saw how many holes Dr. Way had made.

"Frank?" Dr. Way asked again, sounding concerned.

Frank exhaled. "I'm fine. I'm just - tired."

"I know," Dr. Way said, his voice soft. He pulled out a cigarette from his case and lit one up, taking a long drag as he kept shuffling through his desk. "I just have to find those books I promised I'd get for Mikey, and we can go home - or, well, I mean, to my house, uhm, but it should only be a little while."

"That's fine," Frank said. He knew he sounded dull, lifeless, but he was just so tired, and what was even the point of this? Why would the Blood Stone ever want this to happen to someone in the first place? This seemed to be a one-way street as far as who got hit the worst by it, but Frank could have told the Blood Stone his relationship with Dr. Way was like that that years ago. This was just rubbing it in.

Dr. Way inhaled another drag on his cigarette and Frank recognized the tell-tale sign of him about to ash; he instinctively moved one of the ashtrays from off one of the office chairs to the desk but Dr. Way was too distracted to see. He flicked his cigarette into one of the old coffee cups littered around his desk and kept muttering to himself, and Frank paused with the ashtray in his hands, sighing exasperatedly. Like always.

Dr. Way stumbled, his hands splaying out against the desk and the cigarette falling out from between his lips to the floor.

"Dr. Way?" Frank asked, hurrying to his side, but Dr. Way just kept leaning until he was on his knees, gripping the side of the desk and the chair and his eyes shut tight, like he was in pain.

"Dr. Way, are you okay? Do you need me -" Frank said, and Dr. Way's eyes flew open.

"Frank?" He asked, and his voice was raw. He stared at Frank like he'd never even seen him before, and Frank knew. *He* knew. His stomach bottomed out and he fumbled to back away, put some distance between them, but Dr. Way immediately reached out and grabbed him by the sleeve, pulling him closer until Frank over-balanced and had to shoot out his other hand to the floor to keep himself upright.

Frank knew what Dr. Way was going to do before he even leaned in, but that still didn't mean it wasn't a complete and utter shock when Dr. Way leaned in and pressed his lips to Frank's. Frank wanted to kiss back, wanted this to be like all the times he'd imagined it to be, but there was still dread sitting in the pit of his stomach, weighing him down.

He yanked himself away. "No, Dr. Way, this isn't, this isn't you-"

Dr. Way pressed forward again, cutting him off with another kiss and his hands in Frank's hair, practically trying to crawl up into his lap, and Frank wanted to moan, was *going* to moan, but he couldn't. He couldn't do this. It wasn't Dr. Way, it was *Frank*, like how Frank had reacted to Dr. Way's guilt in the museum. It wasn't him. It was sick.

He shoved hard at Dr. Way's chest, sending him sprawling back on the floor. He stared up at Frank, blinking, completely shocked, but Frank had to get out of there. Couldn't stay there with that look on his face.

Frank got to his feet and took off, running out of the office and ignoring Dr. Way calling out after him to stop. The students were all in class and it only made the sound of his dress shoes on the bare tile hallways echo louder. His chest was burning and his face was hot and he was so embarrassed it hurt.

He couldn't go back to Dr. Way's house. Not a chance. He avoided the parking lot all together and headed out towards the bus stop he knew was around the corner, used mainly by the students. It'd get him close enough to his apartment building for him to walk.

The bus driver didn't even give him a second look as he got onto the bus and paid the fare, which was good because Frank didn't think he could stand another person judging him right then. He collapsed into the seat and hung his head, breathing as best he could. The hot leather of the seats was sticking to his back and his glasses were slipping down his face, already askew from where Dr. Way had knocked them with his hands.

He pulled him off completely and pressed a hand to his eyes, and kept his eyes closed the whole way home.

*

As soon as he got to his apartment he locked the doors and threw the deadbolt. He knew Dr. Way would be there in a few minutes, knew as soon as he'd run out Dr. Way had tried to follow. But he couldn't do this right now. Couldn't deal with a stupid *rock* trying to ruin the rest of his life and everything that he'd worked for - even if it had been what he'd worked to hide - just because it felt the need to muck everything up.

He went into the bathroom and cranked up the shower as hot as he could stand it, stripping down quickly and stepping under the spray. He forgot to take his glasses off and had to prop them on the back of the toilet. The hot water helped, a little, even if it only gave him something else to focus on for a little while, instead of the way Dr. Way had tasted.

When he came out of the bathroom, towel cinched tight around his waist, he knew Dr. Way was outside before he even said anything, leaning up against the front door. Frank tightened his grip in the hem of the towel and paused, trying to stay quiet.

"Frank," Dr. Way said quietly, but enough so Frank could hear him. "Please open the door."

Frank looked down at his feet. No. He wasn't going to do that. He started to make his way back to his bedroom but immediately stopped again when Dr. Way spoke, almost physically unable to move away.

"Frank *please*," Dr. Way repeated, his mouth obviously pressed close to the seam. "Please?" He was being quiet, careful. Frank lived in an old converted building which meant the entrance to his apartment was farther away from the other doors than it normally would have been, but that didn't mean there wasn't the risk of someone overhearing him. Frank was hollowed out with fear at the thought, but still couldn't bring himself to open the door.

"Please just let me come in and talk, Frank," Dr. Way said.

Frank shook his head, even though Dr. Way couldn't see him, and headed back to his bedroom, closing the door behind him. He changed quickly, his damp hair wetting the neck of his shirt. He wasn't going to let Dr. Way in. He wasn't. Dr. Way would just have to wait, *outside*, until Ray got back with the Stone, and then they could be un-soul-bonded, and Frank could - could plead his case. Logically. He wouldn't be able to stay in Newark, obviously, but he still might be able to get a job somewhere in the state, if he promised never to bother Dr. Way ever again.

He ran a hand through his messy hair and sighed. He was so damn *tired* and he *knew* Dr. Way was still outside. Was he just going to stay out there all night? Jesus.

Frank tried to distract himself by organizing some of the mess in his bedroom, the door firmly shut between him and anything Dr. Way might try to say to him. He straightened some of the bookshelves and halfheartedly moved some of the piles of records around, not really making a difference. There were stacks of papers on his little desk in the corner, part of a collection he was working on documenting some of Dr. Way's cases, and his stomach ached when he saw how many of the pages were covered in Dr. Way's scrawling, exuberant handwriting.

He ran a finger over the smudged ink in the margins where Dr. Way had pressed so firmly into the paper with his pen, so excited about the topic that the nib had splattered and bled through the next three pages. He could feel the grooves of it under his fingertips.

In one fell swoop he shoved all of the papers off the desk and to the floor. They scattered about him, littering the floor, but he just yanked his glasses off and pressed his eyes to his forearm, breathing deep, calming himself. Dr. Way was still *outside*.

Letting Dr. Way in was what had gotten him into this trouble in the first place. He knew the door was locked. Dr. Way had to leave him alone until Ray got back. He didn't want to be soul-bonded to Frank either. He knew that. That much was obvious. He half hoped Dr. Way would just give up and leave, even though it rolled through his gut how much he half hoped he would stay.

Frank yanked on the chain to the light, throwing the room into darkness, and fumbled his way to the bed. The scattered pieces of paper crunched and crumpled beneath his bare feet but he didn't even care. He curled up under the covers, sheets over his head, and tried to pretend he would actually be able to fall asleep.

*

Frank spent the whole of the next day feeling like absolute *shit*. He'd spent almost the entire night staring up at his ceiling, tossing and turning in the thin sheets, unable to stop thinking about the way Dr. Way had looked at him, wrapped his fingers in his hair. He couldn't hear Dr. Way outside with his bedroom door closed, but he *knew* when he finally gave up and left, sometime after midnight. Knew because it felt like somebody had numbed him, held him down and scooped him out, like that time he'd gotten appendicitis and they'd had to put him in a tub of iced water at the hospital to get his fever down because there weren't any empty beds to be had. So numb it almost hurt all over again.

Dr. Way didn't return the whole next day. Frank spent most of it sweating through his thin undershirt, even with the air in his apartment cranked up as high as he could get it to go. He'd tried to distract himself by packing up some of his things, prepare for the inevitable move, but he kept stopping and staring at the front door and forgetting what he was doing and putting things down at odd places around the apartment.

Eventually he pulled his comforter off the bed, dragged it out to his lopsided, lumpy couch, and curled up in a fetal position, the sweating dissolving into shakes. It didn't really feel like the flu or anything, just *bad*. Wrong all over. Too tired to sleep, too achy to move.

He groggily stared across the room at the wall. He wished - and even though it turned his stomach to admit it, it was the truth - he wished Dr. Way was there. He was tired of being tired, or at least of being tired and alone.

*

"Frank!" A voice called, snapping him out of his garbled dream. He flailed a little on the couch but the room spun around him, and he had to kick out a foot to plant it on the floor and steady himself, even though his vision kept swimming.

"Frank, *please*," the voice said again, and of course it was Dr. Way, and he was back, back at Frank's front door. Frank blinked around himself at the dark apartment. It was night. When had it become night?

He stumbled to his feet, clutching the blanket to his chest. He should retreat to the bedroom. He should -

"Don't *go*," Dr. Way said, and it was desperate, pleading.

Frank wanted to move away, except for the part where he really, really didn't, and he already felt so weak and so tired he couldn't stop the rush of feeling that flooded him, nearly sent him to his knees. Dr. Way was in pain, he *ached*, and it hurt the longer Frank didn't open the door. Frank was making it worse, and he couldn't ignore it, because he could *feel* it, feel the way it was twisted all up around in his bones.

He had his hands on the deadbolt before he could even think, the blanket abandoned in the hallway in a heap. As soon as he threw open the door Dr. Way was inside, his sweaty palms on Frank's face.

"Gnaahh," Frank moaned at the touch, his eyes closing involuntarily. It was like someone turned down the static, or let all of the hot air out of the room all in one fell rush. He shuddered a little and Dr. Way ran his fingers underneath his eyes, knocking his glasses askew.

"Sorry, sorry," Dr. Way managed, panting a little, still not letting go of his face, "I think it's - I think something's happening, and it kind of gets worse if we're not close, and it's manifesting physically, and Frank, I'm so sorry-"

"Door," Frank managed, completely unable to form sentences. He hadn't even realized how terrible he'd been feeling until it had all been tamped down again. But he still couldn't ignore the fact that the neighbors really, really didn't need to be seeing any of this.

Dr. Way just nodded and kicked back at the door until it swung shut. Frank finally managed to pry his eyes back open and he looked up at Dr. Way. He looked *terrible*. He was wearing the same clothes he'd worn the day before in the office, and his hair was even more unruly and he looked exhausted. Frank wanted to touch him so bad he actually ached with it, but instead of being able to pull himself back he already had his hands up and under the hem of Dr. Way's dress shirt, fingers splayed against his bare skin.

"Oh God," Dr. Way said, his body jerking a little at Frank's touch. "Oh, this is so definitely weird but please don't stop doing that."

"How long until Dr. Toro returns with the other half of the Stone?" Frank managed, his voice rough.

"A few more days."

"Oh my God," Frank said, despondent, but Dr. Way just ran his hands farther until they were practically tangled in Frank's hair. Frank was absolutely going to die before Dr. Toro returned, although whether from how good this felt or how embarrassed he was, he couldn't really tell.

"I haven't really slept in a while," Dr. Way said, still just kind of staring at Frank, his fingers still in Frank's hair. "Can we sleep for a while? A long while?"

Frank just nodded, probably a little too frantically, but he didn't even care. Going to sleep and pretending like this wasn't actually happening seemed incredibly appealing at that particular moment, and he knew, he *knew* deep in his gut that even as humiliating as this experience was, he knew he would finally be able to sleep with Dr. Way there.

They managed to make it back down to Frank's bedroom, stumbling a little over the abandoned quilt in the hallway. Frank swiped at it and gathered it up in his arms, Dr. Way's hands still splayed out against his back through his thin undershirt.

They didn't speak, but they didn't really have to - Frank could feel how exhausted Dr. Way was, how confused, how worried he was - worried about

Frank. There wasn't any of the anger he was expecting, or disgust, and it threw him off a little, almost made him stop in his tracks.

He hesitated by the doorway but Dr. Way just passed by him and into the room, toeing off his shoes before he collapsed bonelessly back onto the mattress. He rolled a little, stripping off his suit jacket, but kept the rest of his clothes on.

Frank pressed his palms to the door frame, bracing himself between them, neither in or out of the bedroom. Dr. Way was in his bed, but it wasn't right, it wasn't how he'd ever secretly hoped this would go. Or even secretly imagined it *could* go. But it didn't matter. He'd made a life for himself working hard to keep the things that he could get, no matter how small - and if Dr. Way wasn't actually disgusted with him, then, well. He'd take that too.

Dr. Way curled up on his stomach, arms pressed between his body and the mattress, raising his shoulder blades a little in the light. Frank's fingers twitched against the door frame.

He'd barely laid back on the mattress before Dr. Way was curling his long fingers around his forearm, pulling him a little closer to his chest. His hands were so warm from where they'd been pressed against his chest. Frank wanted to ask him, had so many things he wanted to know, but he kept quiet and let his exhaustion take over, pulling him down into sleep so fast it made him think of South America, falling into the tunnels after Dr. Way.

*

Frank awoke the next morning to the sun on his face and Dr. Way's palm against his stomach, where his shirt had rucked up in the night. He actually felt like he'd *slept*, as opposed to the half-fevered half-consciousness of the past week, even if he had to tamp down his first instinct to jerk away. He exhaled slowly and felt Dr. Way's fingers twitch gently against his skin.

Frank didn't want to remember the last time he'd been touched, woken up like this - well, he'd never woken up like *this*, certainly, but he couldn't help but feel the familiar harsh pang whenever he was reminded of certain

moments. It was so long ago it was like looking at the memory from behind fogged glass, but the twist of guilt was still sharp.

"Frank?" Dr. Way asked from behind him, voice still thick with sleep. "You awake?"

"Yes," Frank said, pulling himself out of his thoughts to fumble at his glasses on the nightstand. "I'm awake."

"How are you feeling?" Dr. Way asked. He shifted his hand from Frank's stomach to rest on his forearm, lessening the contact between them. The intimate tilt of the moment was gone, and Frank pressed his glasses back onto his face before he turned over to his back to stare up at the ceiling.

"Better, I think," Frank said, keeping his voice calm. He was, at least physically. He knew Dr. Way was watching him but he kept his eyes trained upwards.

"*Frank*," Dr. Way said, an obvious request, and Frank turned to look at him, as usual, and as ever, unable to deny him anything.

"Are you feeling better?" Dr. Way asked quietly. His hair was completely rumpled and there were lines from the bed sheet on his cheek. Frank's stomach ached with it.

"I don't know," Frank said, and it felt like a real confession, like the ones he'd had to wait hours in the pews to give. Dr. Way just squeezed his arm gently and didn't say anything, but it didn't matter. Frank knew he was sorry anyway.

The next day was one of the strangest days of Frank's entire life - and, considering he'd had plenty of strange days ever since he'd started as Dr. Way's assistant two years ago, that was something.

They felt better when they were closer, worse when they were apart. The longer the day went on the stronger the pull became, which was largely troublesome because having Dr. Way in his space, *forced* to be in his space, was making Frank twitch with nerves, and Dr. Way was always hovering,

pressing a hand to the back of his neck to calm him, like he didn't know that was only making it worse.

By lunch Frank was so jittery he had to sneak into the bathroom and lock the door behind him. He was in a cold sweat almost immediately, like whatever it was that was doing this to them just knew he was trying to put some space between them. He took a cold shower, and another one, and when he got out his skin still felt hot. When he opened the door, back in his same clothes, shirt buttoned up to the top, Dr. Way was leaning against the door frame smoking. Frank could see where he was sweating, too, beaded on his temple, face a little pale.

"I think it's getting stronger," Dr. Way said, taking another drag. He was staring off over Frank's shoulder and Frank had to fight the instinct to cross his arms defensively.

Frank sighed. "I think so too."

He didn't really try to fight it after that - what was the point? They hovered close the rest of the day, practically tied in orbit to one another. Frank made them sandwiches for lunch, and Dr. Way kept their hips pressed together at the counter. Dr. Way stepped outside on the small back patio to smoke and watch the oncoming thunderstorm, and Frank was beside him without a thought, accepting Dr. Way's cigarette and taking a drag.

The whole situation was twisted, and weird, but it seemed that as soon as Frank gave it even an inch, it flooded everything, and he was tired of fighting it. Especially when the alternative was just - sickness. There was nothing to do but wait.

*

When the thunder started rolling in, rattling the windows and darkening the sky, they went back to Frank's room. Frank lay back on the mattress and Dr. Way sat at the foot of the bed, gently rifling through the stacks of Frank's records scattered about the room, the ball of Frank's foot barely touching his small of his back through his shirt. Frank was incredibly fastidious in his

apartment, but the stacks were chaotic, and Dr. Way seemed fascinated by them.

"How in the world have you been hiding this record collection away this whole time?" Dr. Way asked from his spot at the end of the bed. "I never knew you were such a collector."

Frank rolled his head a little on the pillow, watching him run his hands gently, almost reverently, over the spines. He thumbed a little at the bridge of his glasses, pressing them back up onto his face.

"I've had them forever. Haven't had time to sort them, I suppose."

"Guess I've never really been inside your bedroom before, either," Dr. Way said, and Frank immediately flushed.

"Oh, I'm - that's not -" Dr. Way said, the tips of his ears turning pink. Frank pulled both of his feet up to rest on the mattress, breaking the contact. They hadn't talked about the kiss at the University yet, and Frank didn't want to, but it was there, sitting pin-sharp between them.

Dr. Way fumbled a little with the record in his hand, slipping it out slightly to run his index finger over the grooves. "Where did you get these? I don't even recognize most of the titles." It was a weak attempt at a subject change and Frank wanted to welcome it, but it only led to deeper, more complicated things. Things he didn't like to talk about. But would, of course, because Dr. Way had asked.

"I had a friend back in college. He was really into music, got me into it too," Frank said, trying to keep his voice steady, unaffected. It didn't work, of course.

"Friend?" Dr. Way asked, hands pausing on the slip cover.

Frank pulled his glasses off and swiped them gently against the front of his shirt. It was easier when he couldn't see the details. Just like Dr. Way had never talked about the war, Frank had never talked his undergraduate life - it had left him bruised, albeit in a different way, and he didn't like to dwell.

"Stephen. We were in the same program. We were - we were close." He hesitated, then slipped his glasses back on. Dr. Way was pale.

"You - you and he -" Dr. Way stumbled, and Frank thought it was disgust, at first, the wave of rolling, nauseating *sick* that rolled over him, almost physically threw him back into the headboard, but it wasn't, it wasn't - it was - *jealousy*.

Frank couldn't breathe. He pressed back against the headboard, his feet scrambling in the sheets. No, what? This couldn't - that - it didn't make any sense, it'd never been there, it was just him again, him projecting on Dr. Way, but it wasn't, it *wasn't* him, and he knew it, now, all the way through.

He started to push his way off the bed - he needed a smoke, or to run outside, or - but Dr. Way reached out and stilled him with barely a touch on his bare ankle, already almost entirely up onto the mattress beside him, and Frank went boneless back onto the bed, head rolling back.

Dr. Way crawled up the bed over him and Frank fisted his hands in his shirt, pulling him close, driven on by *something*, and when their mouths met, they met so hard he thought his lip might split in half, but Dr. Way was already fisting his hand in his hair and Frank was moaning into his mouth, the sound ripped out of him from somewhere deep.

Dr. Way pulled back for a second, breathing hard, and just stared at Frank. Frank could see it, could *feel* it - Dr. Way *wanted* him. Frank knew how that felt, to want someone, but never knew how he'd feel actually having it directed so forcefully at himself. It was such a flip from everything he knew, everything he knew about Dr. Way, that it was like he was watching a film, maybe, or having one of those dreams where he watched everything from across the room.

Frank couldn't stand it any longer, lying there under Dr. Way's gaze, so he pulled at Dr. Way's shirt until he had to kiss him again, and when Dr. Way pushed against him he could feel how hard he was against Frank's thigh, and it was like everything went silent in the room, just for a second, except for the sound of their breathing and the thudding of his blood through his heart.

It wasn't just that, though - Frank could feel *everything*, could feel how good it felt for Dr. Way, how he wanted to do nothing more than yank at the front of Frank's shirt so he could touch the skin underneath, touch *all* of it, and Frank was fumbling at his buttons before he could even think. They were still kissing but Dr. Way pulled back for a second to stare when Frank started rolling underneath him to fumble the dress shirt off, until he was down to his undershirt, which he yanked over his own head in one quick motion. His glasses were askew and he knew his hair was sticking straight up off his head.

"*Frank*," Dr. Way said, in that weird, reverent little tone he only used when he was looking at precious things, and Frank couldn't meet his eyes, couldn't think about it, couldn't just lie there with Dr. Way looking at him like that. He surged up and pulled Dr. Way into a kiss, immediately yanking at the buttons on the front of Dr. Way's rumpled dress shirt, only breaking away long enough to push it all off Dr. Way's shoulders and toss it to the floor. Then they were chest-to-chest, skin to skin, and Frank had to bite his lip so he wouldn't make noises the neighbors would hear.

Frank shoved forcefully at Dr. Way's shoulder until he fell back on the bed and Frank could roll over and straddle him, pulling hard at his belt until Dr. Way lifted his hips enough for him to slide it out of the loops and throw it off the side of the bed. Dr. Way was shoving his trousers down before Frank could even get his hands on him, and their hands tangled and crossed when Frank reached in to grab in the waist of Dr. Way's undershorts, both of them shoving at the layers until they were down his thighs and calves and Frank could throw the whole mess off the side of the bed.

He was already sweating, he could feel it, could feel it beading by his hairline, slick on his arms, and when he finally got a look at Dr. Way spread out on the bed in front of him, naked, *waiting*, he moaned. His glasses were sliding down his nose and he ripped them off and threw them off the bed towards the rest of their clothes, just hoping they wouldn't hit the wall instead.

"Frank," Dr. Way said again, weird and rough and low, and Frank had his pants and undershorts off before he could even remember moving and then he was up and over Dr. Way, pressed close, and Dr. Way was sweating too,

and Frank bit down hard on the side of his neck where he could see his pulse beat against the skin.

Dr. Way grasped at his hair, yanking Frank up off his neck, and pulled him into a kiss, Frank kissed him back, leaning into him with his entire body, hips against Dr. Way's hips, making Dr. Way slide back on the mattress, Dr. Way digging his heels into the bed until he was halfway sitting against the headboard, Frank between his thighs. His fingers dug into Frank's waist and he pulled him up until Frank crawled completely up into his lap, wrapping his hands in Dr. Way's hair, thumbs against his jaw, anchoring them together.

Dr. Way moaned and bucked up and Frank pushed down, riding the motion, and their cocks slid together and it was hard to stay in rhythm because of how their skin kept sliding against each other, slick with sweat but it didn't matter because it felt so good, like nothing Frank had ever felt, with anyone, or even how he'd imagined it could feel with Dr. Way, *ever*.

It was like there was some echo, some insane reverberation of every touch, throwing back and forth between them until Frank thought he'd be dizzy with it - Dr. Way's hand brushed his nipple, and Frank gasped, and Dr. Way immediately pressed at it harder, pinching it between his fingers and Frank moaned into Dr. Way's mouth and Dr. Way moaned back and Frank could feel how he felt touching Frank - and it was like some crashing, rolling thing that was building up in his stomach and nerves and bones and cock all he could do was roll along with it and let it sweep him along.

Dr. Way slid a hand down Frank's stomach until he had his fingers around Frank's dick, fumbling a little, momentarily unsure, and Frank knew it was weird because it was reverse how it usually was when he was touching his own cock - which was strange, because Frank had been with someone else before so he'd already known that, but then he realized that it was Dr. Way, thinking that about him, and he got a flash of Dr. Way fisting his own dick, doing what he liked and maybe Frank would like that too, and Frank just bucked harder up into Dr. Way's fist and rutted against the skin of his stomach. The thought of Dr. Way doing to Frank what he did to himself, but not only the thought but the actual goddamn *feeling* of it, was

overwhelming everything, and it was like Frank felt so many things in so many places he couldn't even think.

It was building in his gut and Dr. Way bit down on his lip and twisted his hand around Frank's dick and they both broke the kiss to moan loud. Frank just threw his whole body into getting closer to Dr. Way, touching as much skin as possible, like maybe if he pushed hard enough they'd just be one person, melt together into one body like how it was supposed to be. Dr. Way shifted his weight as Frank lent back and they overbalanced, Frank falling until his back hit the mattress, feet fumbling up against the cold wood of the headboard for traction. Dr. Way didn't even stop for a moment, just immediately crawled on top of him as soon as Frank was down, their knees and hips and chests tangled and sliding together.

Frank wrapped his arms around Dr. Way's back, pulling him down, and Dr. Way fisted Frank's dick and bit down on Frank's neck, the same place Frank had bit him before, bit him *hard* and then licked the mark, and ran a thumb over his nipples and his dick was rutting hard against Frank's thigh, smearing against the skin, and then he pulled back a little to moan "God, *Frankie*" under his jaw, barely loud enough to hear, but it shocked through Frank's whole body and that was it, that was the tipping point.

His orgasm hit like was ripped out of him, like someone was reaching in and pulling everything out of every pore at the same time, and as soon as it started he could feel Dr. Way falling with him, gasping and riding it out on Frank's thigh, still stroking him through it all, and Frank's body just wouldn't stop moving, thrusting against Dr. Way's hand and the mattress and the air and Frank's thigh and Frank's neck and the sweat of his collarbone, and everything was exactly like it was supposed to be because there wasn't anything else. There never was.

Frank didn't know how long it was before he could open his eyes again, but when he did it was because Dr. Way had moved away, was walking out of the room. Something sunk in Frank's gut and he rolled toward him, stretching out a hand towards him in what felt like slow-motion, trying to pull him back. Dr. Way just turned out the light, though, and crawled back onto the mattress in the darkness, grasping Frank's hand and wrapping them both together before pressing them to Frank's chest. Frank rolled forward,

pulling Dr. Way's arm with him, and Dr. Way fit behind him perfectly, just like he knew he would.

Frank fell asleep easily, for the first time in a long time, longer than he could remember, and for a second it sounded like someone was humming. The rain outside was coming down in sheets so it was almost hard to hear, but he could have sworn there was something. It wasn't him, though, and with Dr. Way's lips against the nape of his neck he knew it wasn't him either, but it didn't trouble him. His whole body was humming, he felt so good. It was fine if someone else wanted to agree.

*

Frank was jerked awake by the sound of the phone next to the bed ringing shrilly, rattling in the handle. He'd moved the phone to the bedroom years ago when he'd started working for Dr. Way and kept missing his calls in the middle of the night but he'd never regretted it more than right at that moment. He moaned, everything hazy, and fumbled towards the nightstand to grab it. Dr. Way grumbled and rolled into the space Frank left, half-covering up his ears.

"Hello?" Frank asked, breathless. His voice sounded wrecked.

"Frank?" a voice said after a beat.

"Yes?" Frank answered, hesitant. Dr. Way sleepily rolled over and extended an arm out towards him, gently resting his hand on Frank's calf, and Frank's toes curled involuntarily.

"Did I wake you?" the voice said.

Frank frowned. "Who is this?"

"Mikey," he said, sounding bored. "Gerard won't answer his phone but your number was on the sign-in forms from the other day. Dr. Toro's here. You guys need to get here fast."

"He has the stone?" Frank said, all of the breath leaving his lungs in a rush.

"Yeah. We can't leave the museum with these things so you need to come here. Can you find Gerard?"

"Yeah," Frank said, watching Dr. Way sleep, fingers curled around Frank's ankle, "I'll - I'll find him. We'll be there soon."

*

The thunderstorm from the night before hadn't cleared away the heat at all - it was, if anything, more stifling outside than before. Frank's glasses fogged up as soon as he stepped out of the apartment and he had to yank them off to wipe them on the hem of his shirt. The frames were bent, too, from where they'd hit the wall the night before.

He twisted them in his fingers but it was fruitless. He sighed and slipped them back on, ignoring the way it made him feel lopsided. Everything was already off-balance.

There'd been a moment, after he'd hung up the phone with Mikey, where he'd wanted to lie - he could tell Dr. Way it was nothing, and curl back up around him, and fall back into sleep. It wouldn't have worked, of course, Dr. Way would have known something was up immediately, and Frank would have told him, but Frank had wanted it more than anything, right then. Just a little bit longer.

But then Dr. Way had woken up enough to ask about the call, his fingers still around Frank's ankle, and that was that. It was time to end this, break the soul-bonding, and go back to normal.

Frank wondered what the weather was like in other parts of the country. His uncle had been transferred to the West Coast after the war, was always writing his mother to talk about how it wasn't too bad of a place, after Jersey. Frank could be happy somewhere else. Couldn't he?

Dr. Way interrupted his train of thought when he came out of the apartment, shutting the door firmly behind him and squinting up into the sun. He was wearing one of Frank's old dress shirts and it was tighter across the chest

then it'd ever been on Frank. Dr. Way looked back over at Frank but Frank kept his eyes focused out, towards the street. It was time to move.

*

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The closer the cab got to the museum, the more Frank felt like his skin was going to vibrate right off his bones. His stomach flopped, rolling with nausea, and he pressed a hand to his stomach and exhaled.

"Frank, seriously, are you okay?" Dr. Way asked, sounding incredibly worried even though he probably looked about as bad as Frank.

"I'm fine," Frank answered quietly, keeping his eyes closed. It was better if he couldn't watch the road. He knew Dr. Way wanted to reach out, touch his skin, make him feel better, but Frank shoved the thought away. Frank knew he didn't understand why Frank wasn't speaking to him, was shutting down, but Frank knew Dr. Way didn't understand a lot of things. It'd always been Frank's job to understand those things for him, and he was good at his job.

"You're a terrible liar," Dr. Way said, almost a little surly.

"Did pretty well up until now," Frank snapped, and then they both shuddered, like an echo. He wanted to put a hand over his mouth, stop words from coming out. He had to work even harder to keep his wall up, keep them separate, but it wasn't working.

Dr. Way was silent after that, his arms crossed over his own stomach, staring out the window. Their knees hovered close, only inches apart, but didn't touch.

*

Museum security waved them through, obviously already aware they were cleared, which was good because Frank wasn't sure he could stop his hands from shaking long enough to sign his name on the forms.

The museum was warm, warmer than it ever should have been, and by the time they made it back to Archives the collar of his shirt was drenched in sweat. Dr. Way kept palming at his hair, pushing it back off his face, and it was really difficult not to stare at the way the hair at the nape of his neck curled.

Mikey jerked open the door to Archives before Dr. Way had even reached for the doorknob. He looked like he hadn't slept in three days. Frank knew how that felt.

"Took your time getting here this morning," he said, immediately disappearing back into the room, leaving Dr. Way to keep the door open. "Where were you last night?"

"Last night?" Dr. Way said, fumbling over the words a little.

"Found him at the diner down by the University," Frank said, not missing a beat. "The one with the coffee."

Mikey nodded, like it made perfect sense. Dr. Way just blinked at Frank but didn't say anything.

Frank could feel Dr. Way on the periphery of his mind, though, like always, but almost deliberate this time, like he was trying to find a crack to pry Frank open. Frank threw everything he had on keeping him out – he felt like a balloon, too full, jerky, like the slightest touch would either make him burst or break him completely.

He kept his face steady, though, and just followed them down the hallway into the main Archives room, where they'd met with Mikey earlier in the week. It felt like years ago.

"Hey, Ray!" Mikey called out as soon as they were inside, "They're here!"

Dr. Toro popped his head around the corner of one of the huge Archive shelves and grinned. "I thought so. Gerard, how've you been?"

"Better," Dr. Way said curtly, and Frank felt something inside of himself shrivel.

"And you must be Frank!" Dr. Toro said, coming all the way out from around the shelf. "I've heard so much about you. Nice to finally meet you in the flesh."

"Ah, you too," Frank managed, extending a hand to shake. Dr. Toro smiled at him, bright, like he was pleased. He and Dr. Way had apparently been schoolmates back in Belleville, had known him forever, Mikey too. Frank nervously smoothed his hand down over his tie and ignored the way he knew Dr. Way had noticed.

"So where are the stones?" Dr. Way asked. "I hope it wasn't too hard for you to get them back here?"

Dr. Toro just waved a hand. "Too hard would be too easy. But they're, ah, they're both here now."

"Where?" Dr. Way asked, looking around the room. "And why in the world is it so hot in here?"

Mikey started telling them about the journey back, how the other half of the stone had started heating up once he'd gotten it, like it knew something was up, and how the museum had started heating up too. Dr. Toro nodded his head, chiming in with his side of the story at the appropriate parts.

With Dr. Way properly distracted it was easier for Frank to relax a little, just around the edges. He took a chance to look around the room – it really *was* hot in there. He knew if he pressed his hand against the wall it would come away damp. He wondered vaguely if he could press hard enough against the walls they would give away, and he could climb into the cool darkness, just fit himself between the beams and breathe in the dust.

Someone was humming behind him, but when he turned to look the space was empty. He could feel it, though, like they were right over his shoulder. Frank didn't recognize the song.

The humming faded a little and Frank didn't want it to do that. He stepped forward and it was back again, and Frank was glad, and he knew they were too.

He ran his hand along the curved wood edge of one of the huge shelves, following it around and around until he could barely hear Mikey and Dr. Toro and Dr. Way talking at all. It was quiet, properly quiet, and every step he took seemed like everything else faded away, smoothed out. Books had always made him feel better. At home.

There was a door at the other end of the room, behind one of the sections, and the door lead to a hallway which lead to a corner which lead to a hallway full of many more doors. Frank walked down, humming the song he liked so much but still couldn't quite remember, until he got to the third door, which was unlocked.

Frank smiled and pushed it open gently. It was some kind of office or storage room which had obviously been hastily cleared out – he could still see the dust outlines of where the big shelves had been, the mussed dirt where dress shoes had disturbed the boundaries. There was a safe at the end, though, like he knew there would be, and he knelt down in front of it. He ran his hands over the sides and they came away wet. He sucked a finger into his mouth and it tasted salty, like water from the sea, or sweat, or maybe tears.

Frank pulled at the handle to the safe and it was unlocked, the heavy door swinging open easily. A pool of water slid out of the safe, puddling around his knees, but he just shifted forward to pull out the small box inside, laying it gently on his lap. The humming was stronger now, and Frank was silly to think he was supposed to look anywhere else for answers, because they were all right here. They always had been.

The box had a lock on it but it slipped away easily, almost like it had been greased, and when he pried the lid open he wanted to cry he was so happy - she was there, and she was perfect, and they were together again. Yes.

He reached into the box and pulled her out, cradled her to his chest - something inside of him lurched, clicked into place, and they were

humming together. He was dimly aware of something - something was off, something was wrong, something was niggling at the edges of his brain, telling him something was wrong, but she was saying it was fine, and she'd never been wrong before. There was some other noise, though, and it was almost louder than their humming, but it wasn't as important so he ignored it.

Then someone grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and yanked him back so hard he thought his neck was going to snap. He yelled, falling back, but clutched tighter at the stone as hands and arms fumbled at him, hitting his grip.

"Frank, oh my God, what are you doing!" Dr. Way was yelling at him, twisting Frank's arm, but Frank just flipped around so he could curl up around the stone, stop them from getting to her, stop them from separating them again.

"What the fuck - "

"It did this last time, we have to get them apart -"

"What's that smell? Jesus Christ, it smells like - "

"It's burning his *hands*, help me, help me get it -"

They yelled around him, at each other, but Frank was calm, his face pressed down to the wet floor. It wouldn't be long now. They'd be one, like it was supposed to be.

Dr. Way shoved at him, hard, sending him toppling over. He straddled Frank's lap before Frank could move away again, for some reason it was harder now, it was harder to use his arms to protect himself.

"Grab his arms!" Dr. Way yelled, as Frank frantically bucked up against him, tried to swing his leg around to shove him off or nail him in the side. Mikey grabbed one arm and Dr. Toro grabbed the other and they *yanked*, and Frank could feel something rip, tear apart, inside and out, and he cried out in pain.

The stone went clattering across the floor, hissing through the thin film of water with a wake of steam. Mikey and Dr. Toro let go of him to chase after it and Frank threw everything he had into getting Dr. Way off of him and back to the stone. He rolled, and Dr. Way pitched hard, over-balanced, and fell off of him and smacked against the wall.

Frank tried to scramble for the stone, he *tried*, but as soon as he put his hands out to propel himself forward he collapsed, his arms giving out beneath him. He kicked at the ground, trying to get closer, but Dr. Way grabbed at his ankle, holding him back, and it then it was too late - Dr. Toro had the box and he was scooping her up into it, locking her away, cradling it to his chest.

"She's not *yours*," he spat at Dr. Toro. "Give her *back*!" He kicked again but Dr. Way's grip was firm, and he couldn't move. Frank was going to cry.

"Jesus Christ," Mikey panted, staring down at Frank, then up at Dr. Way. "You weren't lying."

"Where's the other stone?" Dr. Way asked, breathless. Frank could feel him trying to calm him down, wheedle his way into his mind, but he wasn't supposed to do that, he wasn't *supposed* to be able to do that, it was always just supposed to be him and the stone, together, and Dr. Way had just gotten in the way.

"It's at the other end of the department, in one of the - one of the safe rooms. The stones started acting up as soon as they got close, we didn't want them to get too close before you got here," Dr. Toro said.

"Is the door locked?" Dr. Way asked.

"Yes. But this one was too," Mikey said. "I swear it was."

"It doesn't matter," Dr. Way said. He was speaking like he so rarely did, like he was afraid, and Frank paused for a moment to catalog it, feel how that felt rattling around in his brain.

"Ray, take the stone to the main room, Mikey, go get the other half, we'll meet you there, okay?"

"Are you sure-" Mikey started, but Dr. Way cut him off.

"Just *go*," he snapped.

They both took off on a run, headed different directions, and it felt like someone had hooked a tenderhook between Frank's eyes, drawing him after Dr. Toro, but Dr. Way held him back, was still clutching his ankle.

"Frank, stop, please stop," Dr. Way said, fumbling enough to crawl back over him, turning him over to his back.

Frank just shook his head back and forth frantically. It was hard to see - something was wrong with his eyes. He hurt.

"Let me see your hands," Dr. Way said gently, trying to calm him, but Frank didn't want him to calm him, didn't want him to speak to him like that. He clutched his hands closer to his chest but Dr. Way just gripped his wrists firmly and pulled at them until his hands were faced up to him, palms up towards the ceiling.

Frank couldn't see them and he couldn't feel them, really, but he knew how they made Dr. Way feel, and that wasn't good at all. "Oh, *Frankie*," Dr. Way said, and he'd never sounded so sad.

"Why didn't you just let me go?" Frank asked, his voice blurry and tired. "You should just let me go." *After her*, he didn't say. *Away from you*.

"Same reason you never let me go," Dr. Way said, and pulled at Frank's wrists until he was fumbling forward after him and to his feet. "C'mon. I've got you."

They staggered up and out of the room and into the hallway, Dr. Way half-carrying him to keep him upright. It was hard to move, hard to think, hard to do anything but let Dr. Way push him down the hall.

When they got back to the main Archives room Frank had to stop, shocked - the room was a complete disaster from how he'd just left it, wind whipping around and fluttering the pages of books, water all over the floor and seeping down the walls, all of the lights either broken or sputtering. There was broken glass that cracked underneath his shoes and a steady humming, but not the humming of before - it wasn't a song, it was something powering up, revving louder, and it made Frank's head throb.

"This way!" Dr. Way yelled over the noise, leading Frank towards the center of the room where the wind and water had shoved most of the tables back out of the way. Dr. Toro was already there, still cradling the box to his chest, looking a little petrified.

Frank took an immediate step towards the box, where *she* was, but Dr. Way wrapped an arm across his chest, holding him back against his own chest. "Not yet," he said over the noise, in Frank's ear.

Mikey burst through the other door at that second, holding something in his hands, a towel, it looked like, sopping wet, and Frank could feel the instant when Dr. Way reeled back, something sliding against his brain, his grip lax on Frank's chest.

"Ray!" Mikey cried. "Put it on the floor! Over there!"

"Now?" Dr. Toro cried, obviously hesitant, wanting to help Dr. Way, but Mikey just called out to him again.

"Now!" he said, and he whipped out the towel in his hands, sending whatever was in the towel off and onto the floor, sliding far through the water to rest against the bottom of a stack of water-logged record books.

Ray turned the box over and the stone fell out, immediately hissing as it hit the wet floor. Dr. Way fell back, fumbling for the other half, and Frank lunged forward, dropping to his knees to scramble for the original half, *his* half.

He almost had his hands on it, almost had everything the way it was supposed to be, was reaching out to grab it when he stopped - horrified. His

hands were ruined. The skin was burnt, blistered, raw and red, bleeding in some parts. She had done this to him - she had - she had *hurt* him.

She said she wouldn't, said it was nothing, but she'd lied. She'd *lied* to him. It wasn't supposed to hurt, and he was, he could see it. If she really loved him she wouldn't hurt him like this. This wasn't love at all.

Something broke inside of him, shattered, like glass inside his brain. He couldn't stop, though, not now, and just turned to bellow at Mikey. "*Stop him!*"

Something must have registered, though, as Mikey immediately limped forward, throwing all his weight forward, and grabbed at Dr. Way before he could get to the stone. Dr. Toro was there in an instant, holding him down as well, Dr. Way's arms outstretched in front of him, inches away from the stone.

"No!" Dr. Way cried, and Frank knew how that felt, but it was hollow.

He knew what he had to do. There wasn't any time. He reached forward and grabbed the stone out of the water into his palm, could feel the ridges sear into his flesh, but it didn't matter - he got up and ran across the room, splashing through the water, and fumbled at the other half of the stone in his other palm.

It hurt so bad he was sure he was crying, or maybe it was just the heat and water of the room on his face, or sweat, some deep fever, but he held on.

"Frank, stop!" Dr. Way said, reaching out for him, his fingers barely grasping at the wet fabric of Frank's trousers.

"Let him go," Frank said, and his voice was calm, low, barely audible over the rolling hum in the room, the wind, the hiss of the stones in his hands.

Mikey and Dr. Toro released Dr. Way immediately and Dr. Way immediately shot up, grasping for his half, but Frank jerked back and as soon as Dr. Way had his hands on his hands, trying to stop him, he clasped his hands together, pressing the two halves of the stone together. Dr. Way

clung to his wrists, like they were seared together too, and something burst in the room, pin-sharp and silent, and Frank fell back, writhing it out against the floor, the weight of Dr. Way against his chest, clutching at his shirt.

It hurt like nothing else he had ever felt, not like the time he'd broken his leg and his arm, falling out of the tree, or the time he'd coughed so hard he'd spit up blood, or the moment he came back to the camp in France and saw Mikey, broken and bleeding in the field, dirt and long grass stuck to the hair and filth on his face under his helmet, crying his name as he grasped at his shattered leg with shaking, bleeding hands. Then everything was dark, and sad, and forever, and then it was over.

*

When he opened his eyes again the room was bright and quiet. Everything was quiet. Frank felt hollow, or shallow, like he'd been dried out in the sun. He blinked up at the ceiling.

"Are you okay?" Mikey asked, and Frank had to shift his head to look over at him. He looked pale, and worn, but unhurt.

"I think so," he managed. He blinked down at his chest and Dr. Way was there, staring groggily up at him.

"I feel like I just got punched in the head," he rasped, and Frank would have smiled if it hadn't hurt to move. They both eased up, gently rolling in the water on the floor until they were sitting upright, Dr. Way's hands still wrapped around his wrists.

Dr. Way let go of him with a jerk, his hands still hovering in mid-air, and Frank looked down at the skin. There were red marks, deep bruises where Dr. Way had held on, even though he knew Dr. Way hadn't held on hard enough to hurt. His hands were still clasped in front of him and they were aching more and more with every second as the adrenaline wore off.

"Can you - " Dr. Way said, looking petrified, and Frank gently started to ease his hands apart. It was like ripping a slow bandage off a wound, and he

winned in pain, but when he pulled them apart enough to see inside he could only stare.

His hands were ruined, completely wrecked, but inside, in the crux of his palms, where the two stones had been before there was a small, dark, shriveled looking thing.

The others crowded around him, peering inside, and they all stared at it.

"That is not what I thought was going to happen," Dr. Toro said, wide-eyed.

"They're together, though, aren't they?" Dr. Way said, hushed.

Frank nudged gently at the stone with his finger. The stone crumbled like ash, and everyone gasped, but Frank lowered his hand enough to the water to wash away the excess. What was left was a small, perfectly formed red stone, brighter than the other stone had ever been, if smaller. More concentrated.

He stared at it, so small, so tiny in his blistered palm. He couldn't hear any humming, or feel anyone inside him, spurring him on, but it was okay. He knew anyway.

"Yeah. They're together now," he said, and he hoped they would be happy.

*

Mikey told the museum that a broken water pipe had caused the mess in the Archives section, which was apparently a good enough excuse that they never looked too closely. The other half of the stone from Boston was listed among the lost artifacts, although the majority of the pieces and records were saved, if a little damp.

Dr. Toro flew back to South America a few days later to continue on in his research camp, taking with him only what he'd brought - the clothes on his back, and a small pretty stone kept safe in the pouch in his pocket. He'd clapped Frank on the back heartily when he'd left and promised he'd put it back where it belonged, like it meant something important to Frank. He was

glad Dr. Toro was putting it back, but only in a vague way - he knew that now that the two halves were together, were one, it didn't matter where they were. Home was wherever they were, because they were together.

The soul-bonding was broken. Frank had hoped he would feel relieved but he just felt really, deeply lonely. He'd never realized how much extra space he had inside of his soul until there wasn't somebody else in there rattling around, knocking things about, and it was disconcerting. He missed it, a bit.

"Are you sure you're going to be okay?" Dr. Way had asked, outside the doctor's office later that day, after they'd left Mikey at the museum. He glanced down at Frank's bandaged hands and Frank had to fight the urge to hide them behind his back. He just shrugged.

"I'll be fine."

Dr. Way's shoulders slumped. "You're still a terrible liar."

Frank hadn't said anything, just looked down at his feet. There was nothing really to say. The soul-bonding was broken and Dr. Way wasn't tied to him anymore.

They'd gotten caught up in things, forced together by the stone and the way it echoed them off one another. It was perfectly understandable, and Frank didn't hold it against Dr. Way at all. He just hoped Dr. Way didn't hold it against him.

He couldn't work, not for a while, so the Dean had granted him a leave. Frank welcomed the break, the excuse not to have to be near Dr. Way and wonder if he was thinking about what had happened, but the quiet in his apartment was almost worse. It was impossible to think about anything else when there weren't any distractions.

He'd made it through the first day okay, not touching anything, mostly just sleeping and keeping his bandaged hands above the covers, but by the second he was going crazy not being able to do what he wanted. Getting the ointment tub open was an ordeal in itself.

He was considering chucking it against a wall to get it open when someone knocked on his front door, and when he managed to fumble with the doorknob enough to inch it open he was met with Dr. Way standing in his doorway, a suitcase resting against his shin and an arm full of groceries.

"Hi," he said, like it wasn't strange at all. "Can I come in?"

Frank just sort of gaped at him, but backed away enough for him to enter. Dr. Way dropped his suitcase by the inside of the front door and his hat on top of that, but went into Frank's kitchen and put down the paper bag, immediately pulling everything out and onto the counter, arranging the food in some strange, nonsensical way.

"Have you eaten?" He asked lightly, not looking up at Frank.

Frank just kept staring. "What are you doing?"

Dr. Way looked at him like he was an idiot, and it was a little strange getting that look turned around on him like this. "I'm making you dinner."

"Why?" Frank asked, all off-balance.

"Because I make a *fantastic* lasagna," Dr. Way said, pulling one of Frank's pots off the hooks on the wall and putting it into the sink to fill with water. "And it's high time you learned just how good it is."

Frank was pretty sure he was gaping, but just couldn't seem to stop. Dr. Way moved around his kitchen like he knew where everything was, like it was *his* kitchen. He didn't even have to fight to open the drawer that always stuck for Frank.

The rest of the night passed in the same kind of surreal way - Dr. Way *did* make a fantastic lasagna, which was impressive because he kept taking smoke breaks out on the back porch, leaving the food to bubble away on the stove and in the oven untended. Frank hovered around until finally pulling up a seat and just watching him go. He'd never known Dr. Way could cook.

They sat at the counter and ate, and Dr. Way didn't say anything when Frank fumbled clumsily with the knife and fork, the metal slick against the bandages. After dinner Dr. Way changed the dressing on Frank's hands, his fingers ghosting tenderly over the red marks still around Frank's wrists, and Frank concentrated on not letting his fingers curl up to touch Dr. Way's palms.

Dr. Way didn't bring up what had happened, didn't mention the stone at all, or the kiss, or the sex, or the way they'd touched, or anything - it was like any other day, except Dr. Way was in his space, and he was taking care of him. It made Frank feel uneasy, off-balance, but strangely mollified. It was better when it wasn't so quiet in his apartment, even if it was Dr. Way muttering as he scrubbed pans in the sink.

Frank spent most of the time after dinner avoiding him, though, sitting cross-legged on the floor of his room going through and organizing his stacks of records. It was hard when he couldn't hold them properly but he shifted them around enough to at least start to make a difference.

When the exhaustion hit it hit hard, and Frank sleepily rubbed his forearm across his eyes. He got up and peered out of the bedroom into the living room, where Dr. Way was still curled up on the couch with one of Frank's books that he'd pulled off the shelf.

"Dr. Way? I think I'm going to head to bed," Frank said. "You have class in the morning, so -"

"Do I?" Dr. Way asked, looking up from the book to blink at Frank. "What's tomorrow?"

Frank sighed. "Wednesday."

Dr. Way smiled. "Of course it is."

Frank just nodded quietly and headed back to his bedroom, closing the door behind him and silently slipping between the sheets. He probably should have asked Dr. Way to leave, made up some excuse, but he was too tired to

lie to himself. It was better when he was there, even if he wasn't here with him.

Frank dropped off easily, but gasped awake sometime later groggy and disoriented from dreams of rising water and suffocating, someone's hands at his throat, dragging him down and filling his mouth with coals, but when he woke up it was just the sheet twisted around his bare chest that was holding him down.

He fumbled for his glasses and winced when he knocked his hand against the sharp corner. Without even thinking about it he reached out to the space beside him but it was empty, cold, and he felt horribly, desperately alone. There was no one else inside his head and he hated it.

He slid out of the bed and wrapped the blanket around his shoulders, padding softly across the floor. The apartment was quiet, still, but the small lamp in the living room was still on, casting weird shadows against the walls.

Dr. Way was curled up in the same spot he'd been when Frank had left him, book cradled gently against the rise and fall of his chest. He was breathing steadily, sleeping in a weird, crooked position, and he was going to get a crick in his neck, like he always did when he refused to be a normal human being and sleep properly. Frank gently eased the book out from between his fingers and slid a pencil between the pages to keep his place, and laid it quietly back on the table.

Frank sat down at the edge of the couch, blanket still around his shoulders, feet crossed under him like he used to when he was a child.

"Dr. Way," he said quietly, and Dr. Way immediately jerked up, hands fumbling for the book that was no longer there. He blinked sleepily at Frank.

"Why do you do that?" he slurred a little, stretching until a joint cracked.

"Do what?" Frank asked.

"Still call me Dr. Way," he said, and rubbed a hand across his temple. "I'd sort of thought we were past formalities."

Frank's stomach flopped and he pulled the blanket tighter around his shoulders. It was cold in there, for once. Dr. Way must have cranked up the window units after he'd gone to sleep. Goosebumps prickled across Frank's skin.

"Yes, well," he started, completely awkward as always, nervously pulling at a loose thread. "You're still a doctor, last time I'd heard, so." It was easier that way. Otherwise felt - intrusive, almost. Like he was pretending he owned something he didn't actually have.

Dr. Way just blinked at him, his head cradled against the back of the couch. Watching him. Waiting for something.

"You're going to get a crick in your neck," Frank said, nodding his head at Dr. Way's position.

"Why did you come out here?" Dr. Way asked.

"Why did you come here at all?" Frank shot back, stunned into admission. They both paused, wide-eyed. Frank felt reckless and he tried to pull himself back but it was slipping away from him.

"It feels strange to be alone," Dr. Way said after a beat, staring at some point over Frank's shoulder. "After all of that."

"Do you miss it?" Frank whispered, his hands momentarily stilled.

"I miss having someone else there," Dr. Way said, closing his eyes, smiling a little in the corners of his mouth. Frank remembered how it felt when the stone was there, filling him, telling him everything was going to be okay, too, but didn't like to remember it, didn't like Dr. Way remembering it, either. He twisted the thread around his bandaged finger until he thought it would cut off all the blood and fall off completely, just dead flesh. He vaguely wished he could do that for all that ailed him - bad lungs, bad eyes, bad heart.

"I miss having *you* there," Dr. Way said, even quieter, and when Frank jerked his head up in surprise Dr. Way was staring at him again, and something in Frank's gut lurched.

"Why did you shut me out?" Dr. Way asked, sitting up and shifting closer to Frank, who immediately shifted back until he was against the armrest, blanket wrapped around him. "You could read me so well during all of that, picked up on so many things, but I couldn't understand what that was like, not until that day in the office when it hit me, when I could feel you, understood how you felt. And after that night, here, with us, I could feel everything, I could feel *you*, and then you shut me out. It was like a wall. How did you - *why* did you -"

Frank just shook his head. "You don't understand."

Dr. Way was still moving up the couch, encroaching into his space. "I'm a doctor, Frank. Try me."

"I think - " Frank started, and then had to stop. There wasn't enough air in the room. He looked at a ding in the wall over Dr. Way's shoulder and exhaled, concentrating on giving him an answer. He deserved that, at least. "I think it was because I'd spent so long wanting to know you," he finally managed. "I was desperate to know you, and the stone just - knew that. But I'd spent so long wanting to know everything about you without you really knowing anything about me, and it was so - ingrained, I guess, second nature, that the stone just made it more powerful. You always said it was about power."

Dr. Way was quiet. "But not just about that," he said eventually. "I think, in the end, in some way, she was just trying to help."

Frank felt himself bristle, and flexed his fingers in the bandages. "I didn't get a choice. She took that away. That's not - that's not help. That's not love."

"I know that," Dr. Way said, gently.

"Do you?" Frank shot back, before he could stop himself.

"I do," Dr. Way answered immediately. Frank's stomach lurched, but he didn't know why, or what it meant.

"This isn't - I'm not - this isn't just some *experiment*, okay, or some adventure," Frank blurted. "It's my *life*. It could be your job - *our* jobs -"

"I know this is serious, Frank," Dr. Way said, stopping his motion forward, although he was still too close to Frank for comfort. "Is it - is it because of that boy you knew? Stephen? Did he - "

"He got caught," Frank said, and his voice was hollow. He'd never forget the filthy, horrible bar where he'd heard the news, how his tonic had sweated through the glass in his palm as their old friend from college relayed the news with almost horrified delight. How he'd had to excuse himself to the restroom to breathe out a panic attack in the stall, where no one could see.

Dr. Way rested a hand against Frank's knee, gently, totally unaware he was even doing it. "While you were -"

"We hadn't been - together in a while. He'd moved away months before. But that could have been me. It could be you. This - look. I know what I'm doing. I have this figured out, and I'm sorry that you got caught up in -"

"Got caught up in what?" Dr. Way said, sounding utterly perplexed.

"The - uhm, the soul-bonding," Frank said, feeling shaky and out of breath. "With everything. I'm sorry, you know, that you had to -"

"Frank, wait, no, that's not -"

"I mean, I had certain inclinations, and I understand that they may have been, uhm, transferred, during the whole -"

"Frank, stop -" Dr. Way said, and clamped a hand over Frank's mouth.

Frank stared at him.

"You trust me to put your life in danger pretty much every other week, but you can't trust me with this," Dr. Way said quietly, almost in awe. Frank wanted to speak but Dr. Way kept his hand firm.

"No, just - listen," he said, pausing, like he was considering his words carefully. "Just because it might have taken me longer to figure something out doesn't mean it wasn't true the whole time, before, when I didn't know it was true. But it *was* true. *Is* true."

Frank just blinked at him. Dr. Way's palm was warm against his mouth, and Frank had to concentrate to keep his lips tightly closed.

Dr. Way finally pulled his hand away, hesitantly, still awkwardly half-poised over Frank's legs. Frank didn't back away. He couldn't.

It was Dr. Way who finally lent in and pressed their lips together - Frank had nothing to go on this time but his gut, and it was terrifying, but he closed his eyes and pressed back. He couldn't hear inside Dr. Way's head or soul or anything but he could hear the way Dr. Way made a little noise into his mouth and he could feel the way his fingers slid up under the blanket to touch the bare skin of his thighs and that was enough.

Dr. Way pressed up higher above him and maneuvered Frank's body until Frank was practically laid out on the couch, his undershorts rucked up where Dr. Way had slid his hand up higher, and he was sure Dr. Way could feel the way he was practically shaking where they touched.

He grasped at Dr. Way's head to pull him down, closer, but immediately pulled away in pain.

"Agh, *fuck*-" he gasped, half-clenching his hand in the air. That was stupid, that was really stupid -

"What, what happened?" Dr. Way asked, staring down at him, face completely flushed, and then over to his hand. "Oh, fuck, yes, that's, uhm, a problem, isn't it?"

Frank couldn't help but groan and roll his eyes a little. "Just a little bit," he said, it coming out a little higher than intended.

Dr. Way just grinned, though, and caught his bottom lip in his mouth. Frank couldn't stop staring at it. "Doesn't mean I can't touch you, though, does it," he said lightly.

"But-" Frank started, eyes wide, but Dr. Way just leaned in again and kissed him, harder, the buttons from Dr. Way's dress shirt dragging up and down his chest.

Frank yanked away. "I don't know what to do with my hands!"

Dr. Way huffed a laugh into his neck and pulled back and up. "I'm sure we can think of something."

Frank kept flexing his hands to the brink of pain, mostly to distract him from actually reaching out and touching Dr. Way again. Dr. Way, though, just gathered his wrists and pressed them up and over his body to the armrest.

"You stay here," he said, squeezing his wrists a little, and when he pulled away Frank did. Dr. Way started to move down the couch and Frank couldn't help but jerk up a little at the motion.

"Where are you going?" he blurted.

"Down here," Dr. Way answered, so casual, gracefully folding up at the other end of the sofa, between Frank's calves, and then he was reaching into the folds of blankets to pull at the hem of Frank's undershorts, and Frank couldn't breathe.

"Oh, uhm, okay then," Frank said stupidly.

Dr. Way pulled on them and Frank had to lift his ass in the air so they could slip down his thighs, but instead of pulling them all the way off Dr. Way stopped when they'd slid over his cock, exposing him to the air completely.

Frank wanted to look away but he kept his eyes on Dr. Way. He was so nervous he thought he was going to split in half but Dr. Way just looked fascinated, like this was the best adventure he'd ever been on, damn it all, and Frank was really not going to think about how he was looking like that while looking at Frank's dick, because then he would probably die.

"Can I?" Dr. Way asked, like he actually thought Frank was going to refuse, now that they were here.

Frank just nodded, and bit his lip, and Dr. Way stared at his mouth for a second before easing up between his thighs, hands spread on Frank's legs, and it made Frank feel a little better to feel that Dr. Way's hands were warm, almost sweaty, even though the room was cold.

Dr. Way pulled at his legs until Frank's hips slid down the sofa and hesitated just for a second, looking back up at Frank to catch his eye, before he slid his mouth down onto Frank's cock. Frank moaned and had to roll his arm to cross his mouth to stifle the sound, but it still came out, high and desperate, and Dr. Way surged forward and Frank could feel Dr. Way's dick hard and rutting against the inside of Frank's thigh through his trousers.

Dr. Way sucked down harder, and Frank bucked up, and then again, and Dr. Way slung an arm across his hips to hold him down into the couch and Frank could feel his toes curl, pressing hard into the armrest at the other side.

There was no way in hell Frank was actually going to last long, between keeping his arms above his body, fingers digging into his own palms in sharp pain, and Dr. Way's mouth on his dick, and he was making these *noises*, but Frank wanted more of him, he wanted as much as he could get but there wasn't enough time for that - but, he could still get a little bit more, just for now -

"You can - you can put your hand - " Frank started, but Dr. Way immediately shifted his hand around to the base of Frank's dick, like he was just waiting for Frank to say it, and Frank bit his lip so hard he thought his lip would bleed.

Dr. Way bucked forward, harder, and it was damp on the inside of Frank's thigh, and Dr. Way was practically moaning around Frank's cock in his mouth, and he didn't look up at Frank again, just kept his head down and worked Frank's cock into his mouth, his fist already slick with Frank's precome and his own spit. Frank's whole body was twitching, jerking, bucking underneath him, and Dr. Way was moving with it, half-fucking the seat and his thigh to get friction on his own dick while he held Frank down enough to keep him from actually gagging him.

Frank didn't in fact last long, not with Dr. Way's mouth and tongue and fist all working him, pushing him to the edge, and when he came he came so hard he didn't have time to warn Dr. Way, but it was okay because right when his back arched and he called out Dr. Way pulled back and off, jacking him through the aftershocks, letting him buck up completely into Dr. Way's fist, dick smeared with come, his whole body still shaking while his mind reeled, completely overwhelmed and shorted out.

Frank blinked open his eyes and when he looked down at Dr. Way he was still touching his dick, Frank's come over his knuckles and some on the bare of his throat where he hadn't pulled far enough away and Dr. Way was staring at him. Frank couldn't even stop to breathe before Dr. Way was crawling up on top of him, practically writhing against his too sensitive dick, and Dr. Way lent down and closer and they kissed so hard their teeth clashed together, and Frank could taste himself, and Dr. Way, and it was better than anything, even before.

Dr. Way pulled away just enough to shove at his fly to get his trousers open so he could get his own hand on his own dick, and when he came it was with his teeth on Frank's pulse and arm wrapped all the way around Frank's back, holding him close, and everything pressed flush together, sticky and hot and so, so good.

Dr. Way panted against Frank's neck, spent, and Frank just stared up at the ceiling, letting everything wash over him. Something inside of him was cracking, deep - he could feel it, but maybe something wasn't cracking - just loosening. He welcomed it.

"Can I move my hands now?" Frank asked, making sure to sound bored, and Dr. Way bit down on his neck enough for Frank to squirm, writhing enough for Dr. Way to laugh and sit up. He looked around them, and the dark room, before looking back down at Frank.

"I think you're right about this sofa giving me a crick in my neck," he said, nonchalantly. "Do you have any suggestions?"

Frank let it settle over him for a second, absorb into the familiar pounding in his chest whenever Dr. Way looked at him, and especially now when he looked at him like that. Dr. Way wanted this. With him.

"I'm sure we can think of something," Frank said, keeping his voice light, and even though Dr. Way caught his bottom lip in his teeth he couldn't really stop the smile from showing through.

It was strange, leading Dr. Way down to his bedroom again, the echo of the past week still around them, reminding Frank of how Dr. Way's hands had eased the pain and sick with just a touch, practically forcing them to make contact, but now - Dr. Way pressed his hand to the small of Frank's back as they walked down the hall and it was easy, light, and it sent a spark through Frank's skin, good all over, through and through.

Dr. Way stripped him in the near dark of the bedroom, a streetlight down a ways the only thing casting shadows. Frank felt weirdly shy again, unused to this, unused to the idea of this, for *longer* than just this, but then Dr. Way was pulling him down onto the mattress and under the covers, arm slung over his waist, and Frank was glad it was dark so only he had to know the expression on his face.

*

When he woke up the next morning the world was bright and blurry. He pressed a hand to his face, fumbling for his glasses, and then on the nightstand, but when he turned over in the bed Dr. Way was there, wearing them and lying back, hands crossed over his chest, watching Frank with odd, magnified fascination.

"Looking for something?" Dr. Way asked casually, like it was nothing for him to be there, in Frank's bed, the smell of Frank still covering his body, morning light making him look younger than Frank had ever seen him.

Frank just blinked at him. "Can you actually see in those?"

Dr. Way just smiled. "Better than you ever could, apparently."

Frank rolled his eyes and reached for them, but Dr. Way pulled back and out of his way. "Hey, wait, no - I'm enjoying seeing things from your perspective!"

"I would have thought we'd had enough of each others perspectives for one week," Frank said, reaching for them again, and Dr. Way laughed and slid down on the bed. He looked practically giddy. In the morning. Before coffee. It was crazy. Dr. Way rolled until he was over Frank on the mattress, pinning him down.

"You didn't answer my question," he said, voice dropping down.

Frank wanted to squirm, or writhe up against him, but he had to settle for squinting up at him and trying to read his facial expression. It helped he was so close their noses were practically touching, breath ghosting across his face.

"Yeah. I think I found it," Frank said, nonchalant as he could make it, and Dr. Way's grin was wide and bright. He pressed a kiss to Frank's lips but right when Frank was going to press up, maybe work them up to a reciprocation of last night, Dr. Way pulled away, fingers sprawled against Frank's bare waist.

"Speaking of finding! I was reading some of your books last night, and do you know that there's a legend that says - " Dr. Way said, and even with his glasses off Frank knew *that* expression.

"No," he groaned, trying to roll away, "it's too early, no, no no, no research talk, not now," he said, but Dr. Way pulled him back.

"But Frank -"

"No, I am on leave from the department right now. On leave. That means no - no adventures, or exploration, or *research*-"

"But it's in Patagonia!" Dr. Way pleaded.

" - or *South America*," Frank said emphatically.

"It snows there in August sometime," Dr. Way said, and Frank froze.

"Really?" he asked after a beat. "Real snow?"

"In *August*," Dr. Way said, and Frank didn't even have to say anything. He never really did. It was always a yes.

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